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Between Everyday Politics and Political Elites: Transmission and Coupling within Westminster's Parliamentary e-Petitions System¹

Abstract

Popular dissatisfaction with representative democracy has encouraged governments and legislatures worldwide to experiment with democratic innovations. However, despite calls for a 'systemic' approach to the study of democratic engagement and participation, empirical knowledge is limited about the diffusion of democratic innovations within civil society, and, in particular, about the connective mechanisms that bring the 'voice' of citizens to the 'ears' of political elites. This article responds to this gap, presenting original empirical research examining the UK House of Commons' e-petitions system. This research maps public engagement with parliamentary e-petitions across a range of expressive spaces, and highlights the facilitative role of non-institutional intermediaries. However, it also underlines the predominant role of institutional actors in structuring public participation, and shows that effective transmission between the informal public and formal political spheres remains contingent on both 'designed-in powers' of institutional coupling and 'developed practices' of public engagement. Through this analysis, the article makes an important contribution to debates concerning democratic innovations, political participation, and institutional design.

Keywords: Representative democracy, democratic innovations, coupling, institutional design, political participation, parliamentary e-petitions

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Popular dissatisfaction with established institutions of representative democracy has prompted a groundswell of interest in the restorative potential of ‘democratic innovations’ (Smith, 2009); and governments and legislatures worldwide have experimented with an array of innovations intended to enable citizens to exercise voice (*input*) and influence policymaking (*output*). However, despite calls for a ‘systemic’ approach to the study of democratic engagement (Ercan et al., 2019; Hendriks, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012), few studies have examined the diffusion of institutionally initiated democratic innovations within civil society, and the subsequent interplay between the informal public sphere of civil society and the formal public sphere of representative institutions (Habermas, 1996). Specifically, whilst the necessity of ‘coupling’ to enable ‘convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 23) between these spheres has been recognised, there is limited empirical knowledge about the facilitative mechanisms that bring the ‘voice’ of citizens to the ‘ears’ of policymakers (*throughput*) (exceptions including Boswell et al., 2016; Hendriks, 2016). This gap matters because the success of democratic innovations requires citizens to regard them as efficacious (Fung 2015), rendering effective throughput mechanisms vital (Schmidt, 2013).

This article addresses this gap by appraising the formal *and* informal *throughput* mechanisms that bring to bear citizen input on the deliberations and decisions of political elites. It focuses on the parliamentary e-petition, a democratic innovation adopted by legislatures worldwide to promote greater engagement with parliament and provide additional opportunities for citizens to influence policymaking. The article presents original research on the UK House of

Commons' e-petitions system, widely regarded as one of the most successful innovations of its kind (Bochel, 2019; Leston-Bandeira, 2019). Specifically, this research examines the major inquiry by the Petitions Committee into the online abuse of disabled people (2017-19), and subsequent inquiry into the wider issue of online harms (2020-22). This research shows that public engagement with parliamentary e-petitions is not confined to the narrow act of petition signing, and occurs across a range of non-institutional or informal expressive spaces. However, whilst such engagement is intrinsically worthwhile and may contribute to several democratic goods, this research demonstrates the extent that subsequent action within the formal sphere of representative institutions is contingent on effective throughput mechanisms. Moreover, whilst drawing attention to the facilitative role of non-institutional intermediaries in terms of issue advocacy and support mobilisation, the research underscores the necessity of formal institutional linkages and highlights the integrative role of institutional gatekeepers – in this case the Petitions Committee – in terms of agenda-setting; reaching out; and 'coupling' the informal and formal spheres.

Through this analysis, the article makes several contributions. Firstly, by providing empirical evidence of how democratic innovations foster engagement and participation across multiple sites, it contributes to the 'systemic turn' in democratic theory (e.g. Ercan et al., 2019; Hendriks, 2006, 2016; Hendriks et al., 2020; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Parkinson, 2006); and by drawing attention to the facilitative role of non-institutional informal intermediaries, it responds to calls for a more encompassing analysis of the actors who forge connections between the constituent spheres of the democratic system (e.g. Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019; Mendonça, 2016). Secondly, notwithstanding this, by underscoring the predominance

of formal institutional gatekeepers, the article reiterates the ‘ineliminable role’ (Rummens, 2012: 25) of extant representative institutions in forging connections between citizens and elites, and offers further confirmation of the liminal position of legislative committees (Boswell et al., 2016; Hendriks and Kay, 2019; Hendriks et al., 2019; Walker et al. 2019). Moreover, by underscoring the necessity of a political commitment to public input, along with a willingness to countenance risk, the article furthers our understanding of the relationship between institutional design and democratic innovation (e.g. Escobar, 2021; Hendriks, 2016; Hendriks and Kay, 2019; Smith, 2009). Finally, by capturing the spillover effects of parliamentary e-petitions, it widens the scope of previous institutionally focused studies (e.g. Bochel, 2016, 2019; Böhle and Riehm, 2013; Leston-Bandeira, 2019); and provides practical insights for those engaged in the design and operation of parliamentary e-petition systems.

Forging connections within the democratic system

Liberal democracies worldwide have experienced declining levels of trust and engagement, with comparative research suggesting democratic dissatisfaction is at an all-time high, driven by factors including political polarisation and economic frustration (see Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020). In response, political institutions have mounted a fightback via an array of democratic innovations. Essentially, democratic innovations are ‘institutions that have been specially designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process’ (Smith, 2009: 1). The ‘reach’ of political institutions has been furthered by digital technology, which offers the possibility of ‘facilitating lateral interaction between citizens and citizens and between decision-making institutions and those most likely to be

affected by their decisions' (Coleman, 2020: 217). This rapid expansion of opportunities for citizen voice has been described as an 'era of communicative plenty', where 'the contestation of public issues is performed in numerous spaces well beyond conventional spaces of public debate' (Ercan et al., 2019; see also Chadwick, 2009). Whether such 'plenty' is good for democracy is contested; and whilst space precludes a detailed overview of this debate (see Ercan et al., 2019), concerns centre on the imbalance between voice and listening, and the quality of connections between these burgeoning sites and with established institutions. More broadly, there is a recognition that no individual innovation can realise a complete range of – sometimes conflicting – democratic goods, or appeal to a wide variety of participatory preferences, which necessitates a division of labour between different actors and institutions (e.g. Mansbridge et al., 2012; Fung, 2015).

As such, several scholars have advocated 'systems-level thinking' (Ercan et al., 2019). As Mansbridge et al. put it, a 'systemic approach... expands the scale of analysis beyond the individual site and allows us to think about the deliberations that develop among and between sites over time' (2012: 2). Hendriks, for example, advocates 'an integrated deliberative system – one that accommodates the diversity of civil society by fostering deliberation in a variety of public spaces', including 'the informal and "wild" spaces in society where communication is unconstrained and spontaneous' (2006: 487-500; see also Parkinson, 2006). At the same time, several scholars have counselled against neglecting the 'the participatory rights of those who persist in having non-deliberative preferences' (Saward, 2001: 371). Such arguments are particularly developed in the e-democracy literature, where the 'clicktivism' critique is seen to 'devalue large numbers of citizen actions' (Chadwick, 2009:

61), and overlook the cumulative capacity of such actions to ‘express the general interest’ (Deseriis, 2021: 2468). In turn, the necessity of opportunities for speaking *and* listening has been highlighted, to enable a dynamic flow of information between sites and to promote a culture of reflective learning (Coleman 2017, 2020; Ercan et al., 2019; Hendriks and Kay, 2019).

By drawing attention to these manifold expressive spaces, the systemic approach has encouraged a more encompassing understanding of political participation that includes ‘informal, open and unstructured deliberation’ (Hendriks, 2006: 492), ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge, 1999), and the small-scale and bottom-up activities that constitute ‘democratic mending’ (Hendriks et al, 2020). However, whilst scholars have become sensitised to these different sites, relatively little is known about the mechanisms that connect them. A handful of studies have sought to address this gap. Deliberative democratic theorists in particular have been concerned with the quality of such connections, which are regarded as essential for a system’s overall health (e.g. Parkinson, 2006; Boswell et al., 2016; Hendriks, 2016; Hendriks et al, 2020). As Ercan et al. put it, ‘expressive, reflective and decision-making functions need not be sought to the same degree in all persons or in every space in the system. What matters is that there is linkage and transmission across spaces with these functions over time’ (2019: 24).

This nascent literature has begun to examine the different means through which transmission occurs. In particular, the concept of ‘coupling’ has been explored as a means of promoting

‘convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Rather than relying on ‘self-generated coupling’, several have argued that representative institutions should engage in ‘designed coupling’ (Hendriks, 2016: 43), creating institutional mechanisms to facilitate ‘better transmission between public (deliberative) and empowered (decision-making) sites’ (Papadopoulos, 2012: 147). Particular attention has been given to the positional power of legislative committees. Empirical studies draw attention to their capacity to ‘forge links between the public spaces in a deliberative system and the more empowered (decision-making) spaces’ (Hendriks, 2016: 57); to ‘reach out to [the] everyday public and actively recruiting under-represented or marginalized voices’ (Hendriks and Kay, 2019: 17); and to facilitate ‘consultation on policy and even participat[ion] in the co-production of parliamentary decisions’ (Walker et al., 2019: 4). This is illustrated by Boswell et al.’s examination of a parliamentary inquiry into ‘honour killing’, whereby ‘existing democratic institutions assume an important role in enabling transmission of ideas from public to empowered spaces’ (2016: 270); and by Hendrik’s study of a legislative committee’s use of a mini-public during an inquiry regarding energy generation (Hendriks, 2016). It is also evident that successful throughput requires political will: a ‘readiness to cede or share agenda-setting or decision-making powers with citizens’ (Smith, 2009: 190) who are ‘increasingly knowledgeable, confident and demanding’ (Coleman, 2017). This necessitates ‘leaders and champions who are well placed to encourage actors to think differently’ about the value of citizen input (Hendriks, 2016: 43; see also Fung, 2015), which also includes public officials tasked with institutionalising new forms of participation (Escobar, 2021).

Whilst scholarship has examined the institutional mechanisms that can facilitate coupling, little attention has been paid to the range of *non-institutional* actors who may act as potential connectors. This gap is surprising as there is a recognition that ‘relying on the existing institutional architecture may not always be sufficient’ (Boswell et al., 2016); and that ‘we run the risk of privileging an institutional view’ over the ‘brokerage or entrepreneurial role of agents’ (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019: 118). One exception is Mendonça, who posits that non-institutional actors such as activists and the media ‘may work as potential inducers of connectivity’ (2016: 171); and in doing so, can help mitigate the dangers associated with the expansion of expressive sites, including power asymmetries and incompatibilities between different discursive dynamics (2016: 186). However, although Mendonça’s study offers a useful starting point for considering the potential range of non-institutional actors that promote ‘connectivity’, he acknowledges the ‘urgent need’ for further research (2016: 186).

Taken together, the literature above justifies shifting analysis from the micro-level of democratic innovations to the meso-level of democratic systems, and for examining the range of actors that can induce connectivity. This article therefore seeks to expand our understanding of transmission by examining the range of formal *and* informal actors that facilitate throughput; analysing the ‘connective strategies’ adopted by different actors; and by critically appraising these actors and their strategies in terms of efficacy and legitimacy. To do so, it focuses on the parliamentary e-petition, a democratic innovation adopted by legislatures worldwide. At first glance, it may seem strange to regard the parliamentary e-petition as a democratic ‘innovation’, as in many countries the right to petition parliament is centuries old (see Leston-Banderia, 2019). However, in recent years parliamentary petitions

have enjoyed a renaissance, driven by advances in digital technology which enable 'larger numbers of citizens to make their voices heard in a relatively easy and cost-effective manner' (Bochel and Bochel, 2017, p. 686). This has led to online e-petition systems being adopted by supranational (e.g. Böhle and Riehm, 2013), national (e.g. Escher and Riehm, 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Leston-Bandeira, 2019) and regional (e.g. Bochel, 2016; Bochel and Bochel, 2017; Carman, 2010) authorities. Indeed, parliamentary e-petition systems now exist in almost all European countries (Böhle and Riehm, 2013; Schmitter and Trechsel, 2004).

Moreover, whilst some scholars have regarded e-petitions as a thin, passive or unreflective form of democratic engagement (e.g. Hendriks and Kay, 2019, Moss and Coleman, 2014), the literature on parliamentary e-petitions has underscored their potential to realise a range of democratic goods. Distinct from 'non-institutionalised' platforms such as Avaaz.org and Change.org (see Vromen, 2016; Karpf, 2017 for a wider discussion), *parliamentary* e-petitions are formally embedded within the representative institution; provide signatories with direct access to the institution; and typically require a formal response if certain conditions are satisfied (Linder and Riehm, 2011). Indeed, in many systems, the petitions body is empowered to undertake further actions such as receiving evidence from petitioners or conducting investigations on issues raised, actions that can result in greater reflection and deliberation within the formal sphere of representative institutions. As such, parliamentary e-petitions are regarded as a form of 'advocacy democracy', enabling 'members of the public to raise issues or propose policies to the parliament whilst the scrutiny and decision-making functions are reserved to the parliament itself' (Carman, 2010: 735). Besides these 'inward-facing' functions of institutional access and policy influence, parliamentary e-petition systems can

also fulfil 'outward-facing' functions of parliamentary engagement; and in many countries parliamentary e-petition systems combine the informative and educative dimensions of 'outreach' with the more active and participatory dimensions of 'engagement' (see Leston-Bandeira, 2016).

However, it is important to note that parliamentary e-petitions are not a panacea, with extant scholarship providing cautionary insights about citizen engagement, institutional procedures, and effects on policymaking. Studies show that parliamentary e-petitions suffer from the traditional socio-demographic biases in participation, with petitioners tending to be highly mobilised, educated and affluent (e.g. Escher and Riehm, 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Linder and Riehm, 2011). Studies also show how institutional procedures for handling e-petitions provide citizens with important cues about the value representative institutions place on public input, which can – sometimes negatively – affect petitioner satisfaction and perceptions of 'procedural justice' (e.g. Bochel, 2016; Carman, 2010; Wright, 2016). At the same time, there is a recognition that political will matters, as 'the success of such petitions remains entirely at the discretion of those in power' (Schmitter and Treschel, 2004: 76). However, several scholars have drawn attention to policymakers' sometimes limited regard for parliamentary e-petitions (e.g. Matthews, 2021 Wright 2016).

Notwithstanding the significance of these insights, extant scholarship has largely adopted an 'institutional' perspective. Replicating the wider theoretical and empirical gaps identified above, there is limited knowledge about how e-petitions are disseminated and deliberated

within civil society, and the wider range of connective channels that bring to bear citizen input on the deliberations and decisions of political elites (for a partial exception see Asher et al.'s 2019 analysis of Twitter conversations). The remainder of this article therefore addresses these gaps, presenting original research examining the major inquiries by the UK House of Commons Petitions Committee into the online abuse of disabled people and online harms.

Research Design

The research was conducted between 2018-21 as part of an ESRC-funded Parliamentary Academic Fellowship hosted by the Petitions Committee. It entailed participant observation of the Petitions Committee, conducted over the twelve-month period when the initial inquiry was conducted and reports published (HC 1459, 2018; HC 759, 2019); and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with MPs (n=15) and relevant parliamentary officials (n=17), conducted between May-August 2019. Interviews were held with parliamentary officials as recent research demonstrates their significance in embedding new forms of 'non-electoral' parliamentary engagement (e.g. Escobar, 2021; Leston-Bandeira, 2016; Walker et al., 2019). To encourage frankness and protect identities, anonymity was afforded to all participants. Participants are therefore referred to as 'MP' or 'official' without specific detail about party affiliation or job title. For ease of differentiation, MPs are identified by letter (interviewees A-P) and officials by number (interviewees 1-17).

Fieldwork was complemented with a qualitative analysis of the Petitions Committee's inquiry reports, accompanying evidence, government responses, and Westminster Hall debate transcripts. All parliamentary documents used are publicly available online, with links in the **online appendix**. Media coverage was also examined. Stories were identified via Nexis, using the search terms 'petition AND Parliament OR online OR abuse OR hate', and date filters 27 March 2017 (when the petition was published) to 31 December 2020; and were subject to manual reading to determine whether they were in scope. Finally, to capture the 'everyday' dynamics of citizen engagement, the research analysed how the e-petitions and inquiries were disseminated on social media. It is important to acknowledge that opinions expressed on social media are not necessarily representative of the views of the general public (Blank, 2017). Nonetheless, the value of analysing online engagement with parliamentary e-petitions has been demonstrated by Asher et al., who state that such data provides 'real-time reactions to a parliamentary event, giving a useful thermometer of how people interested in the issues of a specific petition react to a key moment in Parliament's petition consideration process' (2019: 151). More broadly, several studies have demonstrated the importance of social media in providing spaces for everyday political engagement, particularly amongst those for whom 'political topics are not a major interest' (Highfield, 2016: 13). Taking a cue from such studies, engagement with relevant posts from the House of Commons and Petitions Committee's social media accounts was analysed, along with engagement with posts made by the petition creator/s and civil society stakeholders such as the disability equality charities Scope and Mencap. Stakeholders were first identified through their formal participation in the online abuse inquiry (e.g. as evidence givers); with further stakeholders identified through 'snowballing', for example where a charity had engaged with a social media post by the Petitions Committee or petition creator. Relevant social media posts were initially identified

using the search terms and date filters above; and were subject to manual reading to determine whether they were in scope. All elements of this research received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield, with safeguards built in to ensure the appropriate reporting of any online abuse identified by the researcher.

The Petition Committee's inquiry into the online abuse of disabled people

Launched in 2015, Westminster's e-petition system enables British citizens and UK residents to submit or sign e-petitions concerning issues for which the UK Government has responsibility via an online portal. Petitions are submitted to the House of Commons directly, and the petitioner does not need to secure the support of an individual MP (e.g. their constituency MP). Compared to other systems, there are few barriers to creating or signing a petition (see Tibúrcio, 2015, for an EU-wide comparison). Once a petition is published, there are various thresholds for further action. All e-petitions with over 10,000 signatures receive a government response, and those with over 100,000 signatures are *considered* for a parliamentary debate in Westminster Hall. The system has captured the public imagination. Since 2015, over 25,000 e-petitions have been published, with nearly 1,400 receiving a government response, and over 200 debated. Fifteen have over 500,000 signatures, such as the 'Revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU' e-petition (February 2019, 6.10m signatures) and the 'End food poverty – no child should go hungry' e-petition (November 2020, 1.1m signatures).

The system is overseen by the Petitions Committee, a cross-party select committee supported by a dedicated secretariat. It is responsible for all stages of the petitions process, e.g. ensuring that petitions comply with set standards; checking that petitions receive timely and appropriate government responses; and deciding which petitions will be debated. As a select committee, the Committee also has full powers to receive evidence and undertake inquiries. Several e-petitions have attracted significant public attention. The 'Revoke Article 50' e-petition was the subject of near-daily news coverage as signatures mounted; and the similar exposure given to the 'End food poverty' e-petition started by footballer Marcus Rashford pressured the Government into providing support for low-income families. As with any select committee, the Petitions Committee has limited resources, which requires it to be selective when considering potential inquiries. However, rather than automatically focusing on high-profile e-petitions, the Committee has purposefully used its powers of inquiry to illuminate unseen issues or amplify unheard voices. To date it has held 9 inquiries and 11 one-off evidence sessions, the majority of which relating to petitions started by 'everyday citizens'. Inquiries have included 'funding for research into brain tumours' (HC 554, 2015), sparked by a petition started by Maria Lester following the death of her brother Stephen Realf at the age of 26, which was signed by over 120,000 people; and 'high heels and workplace dress codes' (HC 291, 2017), sparked by the petition Nicola Thorp started when she was dismissed from a temporary receptionist position because she refused to wear high heels, which received over 150,000 signatures. In turn, reflecting its commitment to 'lived experience', the Committee frequently utilises innovative evidence gathering processes. As part of the 'high heels' inquiry, the Committee ran an online forum to enable people to share their experiences of workplace dress codes, with 730 responses received, and also hosted a thread on Mumsnet; and as part of its inquiry into 'fireworks' (HC 103, 2019), the Committee ran a survey that was completed

by 63,076 respondents, as well as roundtable events with military veterans, people with disabilities, and community groups.

Background to the online abuse of disabled people e-petition and inquiry

One of the Petitions Committee's most prominent inquiries concerns the online abuse of disabled people (detailed timeline in [online appendix](#)). In March 2017, the Committee published an e-petition that sought to 'make online abuse a specific criminal offence and create a register of offenders'. The petition was started by the celebrity Katie Price, and drew attention to the 'major problem' of 'trolling' experienced by Harvey, her eldest son. Harvey is biracial and has multiple disabilities, and had been subjected to sustained ableist and racist abuse online. Promoted by Price on several national television interviews and widely shared on social media by Price's followers, signatures mounted quickly, reaching 100,000 in just three days. However, although e-petitions normally remain open for six months, the early dissolution of Parliament in May 2017 closed all open e-petitions. Price's petition was closed with 221,951 signatures but without being formally considered by the Committee.

The Petitions Committee returned to the issue in January 2018, announcing its inquiry into 'online abuse and the experience of disabled people', which it regarded as 'in danger of being lost in the [wider] conversation' about social media regulation (HC 759, 219: 5). In February 2018, the first evidence session was held, with Price appearing before the Committee, alongside disability campaigners. Later evidence sessions involved senior police officers and senior managers from Facebook, Google and Twitter. Written evidence was also received

from academic experts and disability advocacy organisations. In addition to these ‘standard’ evidence gathering practices, the Committee held a series of consultation events to hear from disabled people directly. This included roundtable sessions at Westminster (February 2018 and October 2018) and face-to-face events in Belfast, Newcastle Glasgow and Swansea (August 2018). The Committee also worked with disability equality charity Scope to host a two-week forum on its community webpages (February 2018). Several of these activities were timed to coincide with the publication of the Committee’s draft recommendations, which was ‘the first time a House of Commons Select Committee has run a full consultation on its recommendations’ (HC 1459, 2018: 1). Finally, the public could participate via an online survey hosted by the Committee Office (August 2018), which was completed by 208 respondents; and via a comments thread on the House of Commons’ Facebook page (August 2018), which was seen by 16,654 accounts and had 924 ‘engagements’ (reactions, comments and shares).

The final report (HC 759) was published in January 2019. By this time, the wider issue of online harm had gained further political traction, with a Government White Paper concerning social media regulation anticipated. Recognising this momentum, the Petitions Committee maintained its focus, holding a Westminster Hall debate on the original petition in April 2019 to coincide with the publication of the Government’s ‘Online Harms White Paper’. Nonetheless, the widespread ignorance about the experience of disabled people revealed by the inquiry convinced the Committee of the necessity of a follow-up (Interviewee B). This was given additional impetus by two e-petitions created by another well-known media personality, Bobby Norris (of television programme *The Only Way is Essex*). The first,

published in February 2019, asked to ‘make online homophobia a specific criminal offence’, with Norris describing the ‘anxiety and low self-esteem’ he experienced. By April 2019, the petition reached the threshold for consideration for a parliamentary debate, which was held in July 2019. The petition closed with 153,506 signatures. The second, published in September 2019, asked to ‘hold online trolls accountable for their online abuse via their IP address’ and reached the debate threshold in just three days, before being closed early ahead of the 2019 general election with 133,680 signatures.

Following the election, the Petition Committee announced its second inquiry into online abuse (May 2020). Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scope for in-person engagement was limited, with committee business taking place via ‘hybrid’ arrangements. The Committee held online evidence sessions with Norris (May 2020) and Price (July 2020), before pausing to focus on pandemic-related inquiries. During this time, Price started a second petition to ‘make verified ID a requirement for opening a social media account’, which closed in September 2021 with 696,985 signatures. The inquiry recommenced in autumn 2021 with several evidence sessions with civil society stakeholders. Again, the Committee used innovative methods to engage the wider public, running sessions in 12 schools across the country, and receiving around 500 individual survey responses from these schools. The Committee published its final report in March 2022 (HC 766), making recommendations to require platforms to improve online safety. This included providing users with ‘the option to filter content by user verification status and block content from users who have chosen not

to verify their account' (para. 109), which contrasted with the petitioners' demands for compulsory verification.

Formal participation and direct engagement with the inquiry

As this shows, the online abuse inquiry afforded citizens with a variety of formal participatory opportunities. Many of these were created by the Petitions Committee, who sought to place 'lived experience' at its heart:

It was important for us to engage with disabled people themselves, because we found that they feel very strongly that they are not being heard, and so you get wrong assumptions about what people with disabilities think and what they want to happen. People often talk to those acting on the behalf of the disabled, but they don't talk to disabled people themselves (Interviewee B).

Instead, the Committee worked through civil society groups to identify participants, '*utilising those people and groups that already have connections with those hard-to-reach groups*' (Interviewee 14). There was also a conscious decision – given the sensitivities of the inquiry – to 'keep our online engagement to a minimum' (HC 759, 2019), instead prioritising in-person evidence-gathering activities.

The high-intensity and constrained nature of such activities inevitably limited participant numbers: between 16 and 26 attended events held at Westminster, and between 8 and 15 attended events held elsewhere in the UK. However, a focus on numbers underplays the deliberative affordances of these activities, particularly in terms of shaping the inquiry's recommendations:

People can see very clearly they're being shown the recommendations and asked to give their view on it, and that those recommendations might change as a result of that. Indeed, this public engagement did impact what the Committee were thinking about the recommendations (Interviewee 14).

The presentation of the final report was also reflective of these deliberative processes, with participants informing the language used to represent the disabled community (see HC 759, 2019, paras. 15-16); and the extensive use of verbatim quotations allowing for the authentic portrayal of participants' experiences. Indeed, the value of participation in terms of procedural justice was recognised: *'there's still a lot of value in people just feeling like they have somewhere where they can go and give their opinion and experience, and that's being listened to'* (Interviewee G). Such activities were also regarded as symbolically significant, making visible a group that had been largely invisible in discussions about online harms, whilst demonstrating the importance attached by Parliament (via the Committee) to 'lived experience' (interviewees 3, 9 and C).

At the same time, large numbers of citizens participated via a range of low-intensity actions. Foremost was the act of petition signing, with the accumulation of signatures signalling the breadth of public concern. Also, many signatories contacted their constituency MP, which several interviewees suggested raised their awareness of the issue or motivated their participation in the Westminster Hall debate. Large numbers of citizens also engaged with the inquiry via the official social media accounts of the Petitions Committee and the House of Commons. YouTube videos of the Westminster Hall debates on the online abuse of disabled people and online homophobia received 6.8K and 8.4k views respectively (House of Commons, 2019a, 2019b); and the evidence sessions held with Price and Norris received 6.0k and 4.0k views (House of Commons, 2020). On Twitter, the Petitions Committee (@HoCPetitions) posted 79 inquiry-related tweets, which were shared with its 26.3k followers; and 11 tweets were made from the House of Commons' account (@HouseofCommons), with 390.1k followers. Finally, as mentioned above, House of Commons' Facebook comments thread was viewed by 16,654 accounts and had 924 'engagements'. It is important to set these numbers in context as active engagement the Petition Committee's tweets was low: an average of 1.3 comments, 6.1 retweets and 12.5 likes per post. Reflecting on this, one interviewee suggested that the Petitions Committee *'doesn't have a dedicated group of followers because their topics are all over the place... So, if you're interested in hen harriers, you might not be interested in brain tumour research, you might not be interested in high heels at work'* [i.e. previous Petitions Committee inquiries] (Interviewee 8).

Dissemination within civil society and amplification by informal intermediaries

The inquiries also resulted in numerous spillovers into the informal sphere of civil society. In many respects, such spillovers are intended and ‘designed in’. As one official put it, ‘*e-petitioning forms part of a suite of campaign tools to raise the profile of the issue and also consciousness or deliberation within the public*’ (Interviewee 11). Interviewees also suggested that e-petitions were designed to be ‘shareable’ and easily disseminated on social media. The potential for e-petitions to ‘*become viral*’ was also acknowledged, particularly those promoted by popular MPs or celebrities (Interviewee 17). In this case, the e-petitions were started by well-known celebrities, both of whom leveraged their public platforms to generate exposure. Price used her regular appearances on national television panel show *Loose Women* (ITV) to highlight her campaign against online abuse:

On the 6th February, me, my mum and Harvey are now going to the Parliament Select Committee to now discuss it, and hopefully, Pricey here can change the law! (Katie Price, Loose Women, 24 January 2019).

Similarly, Norris regularly talked about his campaign against online trolls during the ‘structured’ reality television show *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV). A series of (somewhat psychedelic!) scenes depicted Norris hosting a petition party (‘Bobby’s Bill Party’); being moved to tears by the support of LGBTQ+ icon Michelle Visage; pounding the streets of Essex to stoke support; undergoing a juice ‘detox’ as part of his campaign preparations; and, delivering a campaign manifesto to 10 Downing Street. Whilst undoubtedly whimsical, these

scenes reached a large audience (c. 950k, 187% of the average market share), with the show being one of the most popular amongst UK adults aged 16-34.

To drive their campaigns, Price and Norris also adopted slogans that could be repurposed in a variety of contexts, notably as social media hashtags (#HarveysLaw and #BobbysBill). The potential audience for inquiry-related posts was extensive: on Twitter, Price and Norris have 1.9m and 697k followers; and on Instagram 2.5m and 816k followers. Norris was particularly active in promoting his e-petitions and involvement in the inquiry, making 28 posts on Twitter and 48 on Instagram. Many of these included links to the e-petition, which he encouraged his followers to sign; recordings of his appearances before the Petitions Committee; or self-shot films of him 'on location' at Westminster. Engagement with these posts was higher than with 'official' posts: Norris' Twitter posts averaged 60 comments, 151 retweets and 421 likes; and his Instagram posts averaged 572 comments and 15.8k likes (with videos averaging 89.0k views). The hashtags were also widely used by private individuals, with people expressing their support for the petitioners; sharing the e-petitions on their own social media feeds; and discussing related issues or personal experiences.

Advocacy groups and charities were also active, such as the disability equality and support charities Scope, Mencap, Leonard Cheshire, Dimensions UK and Inclusion London. As detailed above, several of these were formally involved in the inquiries. These groups also used social media to promote the e-petition, encourage participation, and share videos of their appearances before the Committee. Many also capitalised on the 'window of opportunity'

created by the inquiry to raise public awareness and to promote their own campaigns. Dimensions UK, for example, tagged its inquiry-related tweets with #ImwithSam, linking to its campaign to end learning disability and autism hate crime. Again, these activities took the issue to a larger audience, including Mencap's 214k Twitter followers and Scope's 105k followers. Individual activists were also instrumental in disseminating the inquiries and encouraging public discussion. Accessibility rights blogger Dermot Devlin of My Way Access, for example, used the hashtag #HarveysLaw to share his experience of online abuse, which he recounted in a BBC News interview following the publication of the Petition Committee's report (BBC News, 2019b).

Finally, the salience of the issue meant that the inquiries received widespread media coverage, with further impetus provided by the petitioners' profiles (nearly all stories made at least passing reference to the petitioners, in particular Price). Indeed, the online abuse of disabled people inquiry received the most coverage of any Petitions Committee inquiry, with 62 stories carried in national and local newspapers, and 27 reports on national and local television and radio. Reportage was accompanied by a wider discussion of the abuse experienced by disabled people, for example in op-ed pieces in national newspapers (e.g. Hinsliff, 2019). Several outlets also sought the views of those with lived experience: well-known actor and disability rights campaigner Samantha Renke was interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme (BBC News, 2019a), as was Dermot Devlin (above) for BBC News.

The connective strategies of informal intermediaries and formal gatekeepers

Discussion about the online abuse of disabled people and online harms thus took place within a range of informal communicative spaces; and within this, several non-institutional actors utilised their resources to raise the issues' profiles on the ground and place pressure on formal representative institutions. In particular, the above overview shows how the celebrity petitioners sought to utilise their public platforms to foster support amongst their fanbase and garner media attention. It is likely that their actions exposed the inquiries to a wider and more diverse range of citizens, and engaged groups who would not typically be regarded as 'political junkies' (see Coleman, 2003). The television series *The Only Way is Essex*, for example, is one of the most popular amongst 16-24 and 25-34 year olds, age groups that typically are less likely to vote, have less interest in politics and are less satisfied with democracy (Hansard Society, 2019). Similarly, social media users tend to be younger, with 97% of 16-24 and 91% of 25-34 year olds being regular users, compared to 58% of 55-64 year olds and 34% of over 65s (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Elsewhere, connections were forged by disability advocacy groups, who actively promoted the inquiry to their existing supporter networks, thus engaging those who were already receptive to issues concerning disability equality.

Nonetheless, these actions did not provide 'procedural guarantees' (Hendriks, 2016: 44) of a connection between informal sites of public deliberation and formal sites of elite deliberation and decision-making. Such guarantees were instead provided by the Petitions Committee, whose designed-in powers equipped it with significant discretion, which the Committee purposefully used to 'draw attention to issues that had been neglected, and were not picked up by any other select committee or anyone in the House' (Interviewee C). In some respects,

the focus on the online abuse of disabled people ran counter to this, with the inquiry launched against a backdrop of mounting parliamentary pressure for the effective regulation of social media (the Home Affairs Committee, for example, had recently inquired into online hate crime and extremism). Nonetheless, as one official put it:

So many people were focused on children, or on terrorism, or often on abuse that MPs themselves get. All of which are important, but it felt like there was this whole space, the experience of disabled people that just wasn't being looked at (Interviewee 1).

This was also reiterated in the final report, which stated that ‘We see our role as highlighting in Parliament those issues that may not otherwise receive the focus they should. Ms Prices’ petition raises an issue that seemed in danger of being lost in the conversation – the experience of disabled people online’ (HC 759, 2019, para. 4).

Designed-in powers of discretion were complemented by *developed practices* of public participation. These stemmed from a strong commitment on the part the Petitions Committee’s members (particularly its Chair) and secretariat to involving the public in the parliamentary process and capturing lived experience:

The committee were conscious that they didn't have a subject expertise in a way that the Work and Pensions Committee has or the Transport Committee has. But their expertise or their reason for being was hearing directly from people... I think

we always tried to alight on things where people's lived experience was really central (Interviewee 1).

This commitment fostered innovation in terms of the tools used to engage the public, especially harder-to-reach groups. This was evident throughout the online abuse inquiry, where the Committee combined online and in-person activities on different scales and at different stages to directly involve the disabled community and wider public. Indeed, several interviewees described the Committee as being at the forefront of championing public participation: as one official put it, *'it wasn't just the numbers of petitions coming in that was unprecedented, it was also how active the Committee decided that it wanted to be'* (Interviewee 14).

The Petition Committee was also innovative in its use of 'celebrity politics', leveraging the profile of the celebrity petitioners to foster engagement with the inquiry. The Committee heavily promoted the appearances of Price and Norris, as reflected in the relatively high number of social media posts that mentioned them compared to other witnesses. It also used their profiles as a 'hook' in other inquiry-related tweets intended to drive public participation:

A petition from @katieprice led us to investigate the shocking abuse disabled people face online. We've had some ideas for how to tackle it and we want to hear from you. You can tell us what you think here... (@HocPetitions, Twitter, 3 August 2018).

However, the Committee's use of celebrity politics was not without risks. Extant research shows that receptivity to a celebrity's cause is contingent upon the celebrity's perceived credibility or favourability (Becker, 2013), and in this instance, a range of negative comments about the petitioners were posted on the social media accounts of the Petitions Committee and the House of Commons:

[Price] knows the how the fame game goes. She's far from a rookie. She should be doing more to shield her kids from it. Talking about paying for prostitutes, turning up embarrassingly drunk everywhere, showing sex videos of her ex to wide audiences (without permission)... She's a hypocrite (Comment on House of Commons' Facebook pages, 18 February 2018).

In particular, when Price was issued with restraining order for verbal abuse (Sky News, 2019), several questioned her credentials as an anti-bullying campaigner, which risked negative overflows for the inquiry and the Committee's reputation:

Have you actually checked out her history of restraining orders and abuse of others? Strange choice to champion this cause (Comment to @HoCPetitions, 27 June 2020).

More broadly, the Committee had to strike a balance between maximising the petitioners' celebrity profiles and ensuring space for a wide range of voices to be heard, a task made more challenging by the petitioners' activities in the sphere of civil society which sometimes blurred the line between issue-promotion and self-promotion (Interviewees B, 7 and 14).

The Committee's innovative approach reflected the willingness of members and officials to step outside their comfort zone to develop new relationships and alternative evidence bases:

One of the barriers that we're often fighting in Parliament is people thinking of a hierarchy of evidence. So, people thinking these lived experience voices are all very well and good, but they're not really quite as good as a proper academic or a think tank. And I think [the Petitions Committee] proved that you could do something that was really focused around people's voices, but that was also intellectually rigorous (Interviewee 1).

Diverging from 'standard' evidence gathering practices is often regarded by committees as high-risk (see Geddes, 2020), and the use of celebrity politics in particular posed risks concerning receptivity and reputation. Yet to interviewees such risks were worth taking, in terms of affording voice and exerting influence:

Actually having those raw voices of people who are talking directly from their lived experience is really influential. It can shift the Government much more than hours and hours of expert testimony, even if that testimony is telling those stories second-hand. Somehow even that doesn't have that kind of direct emotional connection (Interviewee 9).

Indeed, in the Westminster Hall debate on the online abuse of disabled people, the Minister for Digital and Creative Industries declared: 'I have been very affected by some of the things that I had heard in this debate... [U]ntil this petition and the Committee's report, there had not been enough exposure of the true extent of the abuse of people with disabilities'

(*Hansard*, 29 April 2019). She then committed the Government to engaging the disabled community in its plans to regulate social media.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The Petition Committee's inquiries have been conducted against a backdrop of mounting pressure for better regulation of social media. Moreover, the Government itself is committed to change, publishing its 'Online Harms White Paper' (CP 57) in April 2019, which set out plans for a statutory duty of care on the part of social media providers. In May 2021, the Government's draft Online Safety Bill (CP 405) was published with provisions to protect users from content that 'particularly affect people with a certain characteristic (or combination of characteristics), or to particularly affect a certain group of people' (s. 46.4); and the subsequent Online Safety Bill was published in March 2022 with similar provisions (Bill 285, 2022). Whilst the extent that the Committee's inquiry *directly* influenced the Government's actions is moot, it is worth noting that the White Paper acknowledges the inquiry's role in 'highlight[ing] the extreme abuse experienced online by disabled people'. Evidence also suggests the inquiry had anticipatory effect, encouraging the Government to involve the disabled community in its Online Harms consultation (albeit via advocacy organisations) (see HM Government, 2020). Similarly, it is worth noting the Government's swift and largely positive response to the Committee's 'tackling online abuse' report, with the Government accepting recommendations to protect users with certain characteristics or membership of certain groups (HC 1224, 2022, p. 5), whilst also claiming that action is already underway in relation to several other recommendations.

As this suggests, a sole focus on policy change is an ‘unduly blunt’ (Wright, 2016: 845) measure of success, particularly when existing studies suggest that e-petitions rarely result in direct policy change (Bochel, 2019; Wright, 2016). Instead, this case shows that e-petitions can provide policymakers with important cues about the public mood; and can entail an ‘anticipatory effect’, pressuring governments to publicly acknowledge the issue raised. Moreover, the findings of this case also dovetail with scholarship that highlighted the intrinsic benefits of parliamentary e-petitions in terms of ‘procedural justice’ (e.g. Bochel 2016; Carman, 2010; Leston-Bandeira, 2019). By mapping public engagement with the inquiries across a range of expressive spaces, this article shows how parliamentary e-petitions systems can be engineered to provide multiple opportunities for citizen engagement and appeal to a range of participatory preferences; and in doing so, it offers an important counterweight to criticisms that e-petitions are little more than a thin, passive or unreflective form of engagement (e.g. Hendriks and Kay, 2019, Moss and Coleman, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of petitions will not be the subject of an in-depth inquiry: to date the Petitions Committee has only held 9 inquiries and 11 one-off evidence sessions. However, a focus on numbers belies the wider intrinsic benefits of such activities, as the case shows how the direct engagement of those with lived experience can amplify marginalised voices, afford dignity to participants and can have wider symbolic potency. The case also demonstrates how e-petitions can foster more deliberative practices, leading to ‘mutual influence and mutual adjustment’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012), as evidenced by how the Petitions Committee modified its draft recommendations and reflected on the language used to represent the disabled community.

More broadly, by drawing attention to the wider network of informal expressive spaces, this article offers further confirmation of the analytical value of meso-level ‘systems thinking’ (Ercan, 2019; Mansbridge et al., 2012). The case shows how democratic innovations (such as parliamentary e-petitions) can entail a range of spillover effects, stimulating everyday political action in the informal sphere of civil society, where engagement is unmediated, organic and often indirect. It also underscores how social media can be used to provide informal communicative spaces and foster autonomous networks of solidarity and support (Chadwick, 2009; Deseriis, 2021); and contra concerns about thin citizenship and ‘clicktivism’, it shows how the aggregation of low-cost individual actions can provide an impetus for change. The case also underlines the inherent value of such everyday political practices (e.g. Mansbridge, 1999; Highfield, 2018). Put simply, if informal engagement with parliamentary e-petitions – whether on social media, in the mainstream media or elsewhere in civil society – results in nothing more than an individual citizen becoming more aware of a specific issue or injustice, this is still a valuable outcome.

At the same time, the article demonstrates the extent that the realisation of such democratic goods is contingent on effective throughput or connective mechanisms, an issue relatively neglected within extant studies of democratic innovations (notable exceptions being Boswell et al., 2016; Escobar, 2021; Hendriks, 2016). Moreover, departing from existing scholarship, this article has drawn attention to the formal gatekeepers *and* informal intermediaries that can facilitate connectivity, and in doing so responds to calls to move beyond a narrow

institutional view of ‘coupling’ (e.g. Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019; Boswell et al., 2016; Mendonça, 2016). However, whilst this article draws attention to the facilitative role of non-institutional intermediaries in terms of issue advocacy and support mobilisation, it underscores the predominant role of institutional actors (i.e. the Petitions Committee) in structuring public participation. Nonetheless, the article raises several red flags concerning the connective strategies of non-institutionalised actors. In this case, whilst the celebrity petitioners took the inquiry to a wider audience, the legitimacy of their representative claims was challenged by numerous citizens; and rather than enhancing receptivity, the use of ‘celebrity politics’ by the Petitions Committee entailed spillover risks in terms of participation and the wider reputation of the e-petitions system. These findings dovetail with extant scholarship on celebrity politics (e.g. Becker, 2013; Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019), and strike a note of caution when considering the capacity of non-institutional actors to ameliorate the pitfalls resulting from the expansion of expressive sites (c.f. Mendonça, 2016).

Bringing these findings together, this article contributes to broader debates about the relationship between democratic innovation and institutional design. This case provides practical transferable lessons about how democratic innovations can be designed to operate ‘at scale’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012) by embedding a range of participatory opportunities across multiple formal *and* informal venues, and by establishing connective mechanisms between these different communicative spaces. In particular, this article reiterates the positional power of legislative committees as interfaces between the public and wider parliamentary process; and of their relative democratic and representative legitimacy vis-à-vis non-institutional actors. However, it is also clear that effective designed coupling

necessitates well-placed institutional champions who are committed to the principles of public engagement; and are willing to take risks to engage a diversity of audiences. Those engaged in ‘designed coupling’ should therefore ensure that mechanisms are institutionally *and* culturally embedded, so that public participation is valued for its intrinsic and epistemic benefits. This should also be accompanied by a critical reappraisal of established evidence-gathering practices, as reliance upon tried-and-tested repertoires can occlude their disadvantages and discourage innovation (see Geddes, 2020). At the same time, institutional actors should remain cognisant of the trade-offs associated with non-institutionalised ‘connective strategies’ and seek to mitigate accordingly. To help forge connections between the manifold ‘many publics’ of civil society and established representative institutions, future research should therefore engage in applied theory building to examine the conditions under which political elites engage with public input, and to further consider the relative efficacy and legitimacy of the throughput mechanisms that may encourage uptake.

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The policy can be read here:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/index>

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