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Digital communication and representational interactivity

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Title

Digital communication and representational interactivity: an analysis of www.writetothem.com in Scotland

Abstract

The potential of the internet to address deficits in the relationship between representatives and represented has been discussed for some time. This article analyses whether 'www.WriteToThem.com', an online tool allowing people to contact their elected members of local, sub-national, national and European parliaments, promotes 'interactivity' between elected and electors.

The analysis uses data from a survey and interviews with Scottish local councillors and Members of the Scottish Parliament.

The article finds that WTT is not suitable to generate high levels of interactivity between citizens and the elected and is used for purposes not intended by its makers nor necessarily appreciated by the elected.

Word count

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Academics and others have long debated the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to increase electoral turnout, stimulate political participation and foster communication between the elected and their electors, and between citizens and public servants. The actual spread and availability of, and wide access to, the internet as the latest ICT innovation is still a comparatively recent phenomenon. Since the 1990s, the internet has found a place in politics for chiefly two purposes. Firstly, it has become a means for what is termed e-government (e.g. Silcock 2001) and has been used to, for example, improve the quality of public services and reduce their cost. Secondly, the internet has been employed in the hope to practice democracy 'without limits of time, place and other physical conditions' (van Dijk 2000, 30). Here, the terms e-democracy or virtual democracy (e.g. Wilhelm 2000) are used to refer to a wide range of practices in three dimensions – information, discussion, and decision-making and participation

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(Vedel 2006) – along which democratic engagement is sought to increase via a variety of electronic means (e.g. Hilbert 2009; Baxter et al 2016; Breindl & Francq 2008).

The focus of this article is on the second use of the internet, as it presents an analysis of a distinct e-democracy tool regarding its ability to stimulate 'interactivity' between elected representatives and the represented. This tool is WriteToThem.com (WTT) – a website developed for people in the United Kingdom (UK) to simplify contacting representatives on the local, sub-national, national and EU levels. WTT is an attempt to embody what Jan van Dijk refers to as 'the strongest appeal, perhaps, of digital democracy, [.] the potential reinforcement of interactive politics between citizens, representatives, governors and civil servants' (van Dijk 2000, 47).

In this article, the ability of WTT to reinforce the represented-representative relationship in the context of Scottish subnational and local politics is analysed. In other words, in the crosshairs of the article is the question whether WTT has reinforced interactivity between people in Scotland and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and Scottish local councillors respectively. Such research is timely and relevant in an age in which 'anti-establishment' or 'anti-politics' parties have electoral success across liberal democracies (Kriesi & Papas 2015; Boswell & Corbett 2015), where 'the politician' is amongst the least trusted professions in the UK (Ipsos Mori 2016), where Scots are the most dissatisfied with the British 'system of governing' (Hansard 2016) (while more trusting in the Scottish political system, Marcinkiewicz et al 2016), where only few citizens contact their elected representatives (Hansard 2016), and where electoral turnouts are generally low especially among the young (UK Political Info). All of this raises the question of how representative institutions and their members can build a 'communicative relationship' with the represented; an issue which, as Stephen Coleman argues, has not been sufficiently discussed by the political sciences (Coleman 2006) and which deserves analysis also from the perspective of the question of the role of the internet in this relationship.

Based on this general premise, the article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the research objectives and the evaluatory framework. It also, albeit only briefly, discusses the literature on the internet and democracy in terms of 'three schools of thought' with the aim of placing the analysis of WTT into the context of the study of e-democracy. Following this, a short description of WTT is provided. This is followed by a section on the methodology adopted for the research which leads to the analytical part of the article and to concluding remarks.

1. Research objectives and evaluatory framework

The article's central objective is to give an answer to the question whether WTT promotes interactivity between elected representatives and the represented and thereby has the potential to

stimulate, revitalise or rejuvenate democratic practice. Part of the answer must be a discussion of whether WTT's technical characteristics are capable of achieving high levels of interactivity and whether or not its users, i.e. the represented and the elected, make use of WTT's technical characteristics as envisaged by WTT's makers or whether they appropriate WTT in their own ways. The research does not aim to assess whether WTT is 'successful' in terms of user numbers or response rates by elected representatives, but conducts an analysis of WTT via the perceptions, attitudes and opinions of the representatives. Thereby, the article addresses a gap in the research on how elected representatives view 'the internet' in the context of 'doing their job' at a moment when it has become ubiquitous in politics and has, as 'Web 2.0', developed more capacity to facilitate two-way communication.

To ascertain the degree of interactivity which tools such as WTT can generate, Jan van Dijk's heuristic matrix of four cumulative levels of interactivity is employed. These levels apply to interactivity between human beings, between human beings and media or machines, between human beings by means of media, and between media or between machines. Van Dijk's matrix is therefore not confined to the analysis of communication via ICT or 'networks' (as he refers to ICT) but can be applied to any communication. These are van Dijk's four 'cumulative levels and dimensions' of interactivity: two-sided communication where at least one action is followed by one reaction (the spatial dimension); near-synchronous communication which means an uninterrupted sequence of action and reaction (the temporal dimension); the degree of control of communication by the actors involved evidenced e.g. by the ability of sender and receiver to swap roles at any time and change the topic of the interaction (the action dimension); and the understanding of contexts and meanings shared by all interactors involved (the contextual and mental dimension). These levels start at 'primitive' interactivity of action and reaction (to reactions) and reach the sophisticated interactivity of (network-mediated) face-to-face exchanges. Only network-mediated interaction between humans achieves a cumulative high level of interactivity which is comparable with non-network mediated human direct face-to-face communication (van Dijk 2012).

To address the questions of whether WTT as an internet-mediated e-democracy tool has, first, the technical characteristics that allow high levels of interactivity and, second, is actually used to achieve such high levels in practice, van Dijk's thoughts on the 'objective' and 'subjective' capacities of the internet as an interactive medium are helpful. According to these categories, WTT has certain structural 'more or less objective' properties. He calls them 'communication capacities' with 'particular potentialities and limitations which cannot be removed (inter)subjectively' as they are part of the infrastructure of the medium. But there are also

'intersubjective characteristics' of the medium (van Dijk 2012, 16). These refer to how the users perceive the capacities of the medium and the resultant uses to which it is put. In other words: 'how people apprehend and engage with a medium constructs their perceptions of that medium' (Stromer-Galley & Foot 2002, 2) and determines its use. The inter-subjective characteristics and the communication capacities of the medium both influence how, for example, the internet is used as a communication medium and what levels of interactivity are achieved with it.

The analysis of WTT is embedded in and benefits from a substantial literature on the role of ICT in democratic practice. A full literature review is hardly possibly within the limits of this article, but it is important to discern three 'schools of thought' (Wright 2006) on the internet and democratic practices. The oldest of these school has suggested that the internet would revolutionise representative democracy as it removes the 'technical difficulties that until now have made it impossible for large numbers of citizens to participate in policy making' (Masuda 1993, 83). Through e-voting on all policy matters, the foundations for direct democracy would be laid. Following the criticism of such a 'push button democracy' (van Hoven 2005, 53), the emergence of Web 2.0 and its interactive capacities seems to have revitalised this first school of thought to some degree. For example, Yana Breindl and Pascal Francq (2008) harbour the hope that Web 2.0 can be a medium to facilitate information, discussion and decision-making within democratic structures. A second school has argued that the internet provides the technical means to enable deliberative democracy on a mass scale (Kersten 2003) as it can help to develop the 'good citizen' as an active and well-informed member of the community (Hacker & van Dijk 2000). The third school of thought is critical of the internet as a 'technical fix'. It suggests that 'politics will normalise the internet into its established structures, having limited impact' and that politicians will actively incorporate the internet into the existing representative system (Wright 2006, 237). Such cyber-pessimists say that the internet alone cannot change the form or processes of democracy due to the political system's reluctance to change and the unwillingness of citizens to transform themselves into 'good citizens' (Bentivegna 2006). As a result, political scientists should understand the internet only as an additional communication channel in the political game (Margolis & Resnick 2000).

On the basis of the evaluatory framework and the literature review, the following hypotheses informed the data analysis and structure the article:

H1: WTT allows for high levels of interactivity considering its 'objective communication capacities'.

H2: WTT users will appropriate WTT as they see fit and not according to its objective communication capacities.

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H3: WTT does not, in practice, lead to high levels of interactivity between the represented and the representatives.

After this short outline of research questions and hypotheses, analytical framework and the literature in which the article is embedded the next section describes WTT itself.

2. WriteToThem.com: a non-disruptive e-democracy tool

WTT is the internet version of FaxYourMP, set up in the 1990s. Its makers are MySociety – a 'brand' of the UK Citizens Online Democracy charity – who have developed a number of further e-democracy and e-government tools. Among these are TheyWorkForYou; FixMyStreet; WhatDoTheyKnow; FixMyTransport; PledgeBank; and HearFromYourMP. MySociety say about themselves that they 'invent and popularise digital tools that enable citizens to exert power over institutions and decision makers' (MySociety 2015a). MySociety describe the internet as a tool to enrich and change, but not to disrupt, democracy: 'We work online because we believe that the internet can meaningfully lower the barriers to taking the first civic or democratic steps in a citizen's life, and that it can do so at scale'. An important step is that of 'engagement' with government and communities through communication (MySociety 2015a).

MySociety refer to WTT as the 'first democratic web tool in the UK' (MySociety 2015b). Despite such claims, WTT is relatively simple website which allows people to use their post code to find their representatives – on the local, sub-national, national and EU levels – in order to send an e-mail to them. Where there is more than just representative, WTT allows sending the same message to all representatives. It is not possible to email all members of a parliament or local council 'in one go'. These are the 'more or less objective' properties of WTT, i.e. the 'communication capacities' with 'particular potentialities and limitations which cannot be removed (inter)subjectively' (van Dijk 2012, 16).

Data on how WTT is used is not easily available. MySociety monitors usage only in so far as it makes a record of the message, as sent via the website, to the representative. Any communication following this first step develops directly between the representative and the contacting person via 'normal' email and is not recorded. In 2010, the year of the most recent data available, 53% of all emails went to MPs, 19% to councillors, 16% to MEPs. The remaining emails went to other levels of government, including to members of Britain's devolved parliaments and assemblies (Escher 2011, 18). MySociety has, via a randomised annual survey of WTT users, has generated data about whether users actually receive a meaningful reply. Only for MPs were the results published on a name-by-name basis (WTT 2014a). MySociety produce more general data on the responsiveness on the other seven level of representation. In 2014, Welsh and Scottish

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parliamentarians were the most responsive with 64% and 61% respectively having responded within three weeks. Councillors and MPs were just behind, with 55% and 53% respectively (WTT 2014b). The data published by MySociety gives no indication as to the quality of the responses. However, survey respondents were asked not to report an automated acknowledgement of receipt as a response.

It is even more difficult to obtain demographic data on those who contact representatives via WTT. There is only little data on this aspect. According to MySociety, WTT 'has helped citizens send over 1,000,000 messages since it was launched in 2005, and our statistics show that more than 40% of the people using it have never written to a politician before' (MySociety 2015b). But MySociety cannot give figures on how many people have actually sent these messages. It is possible that relatively few digitally active people are responsible for a great number of messages. Given the persistent digital divide, this might skew representatives' activities in favour of this minority who tend to be better-off, better-educated and in possession of more social capital (e.g. White 2016). However, in a study for MySociety Tobias Escher comes to some positive findings about the users of WTT with regards to the problem of the digital divide. He finds that WTT users are, by and large, not those already very politically involved. Two in five users have never before

> contacted one of their political representatives. WriteToThem users are also not more politically active than the average Internet user […] and in particular they have a strong tendency to stay away from organised groups be they political or communal in nature. In effect, WriteToThem successfully reaches out to people who would otherwise not be engaged and as the analysis indicates this happens in particular on the local level (Escher 2011, 6).

There seem to be differences between people who contact local councillors and other users:

> the local level shows clearest signs of engaging participants from usually under-represented backgrounds. The majority of users who contact their local councillor are writing for the first time to a political representative (61%), and almost three out of four have not been otherwise politically active at all. Also, only 28% of them are organised in some kind of political and/or community group and in contrast to other users, the majority are women (54%) (Escher 2011, 6).

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WTT has not been comprehensively analysed in the academic literature. Paganoni (2010), in one of the few studies taking account of WTT, argues that WTT is a mechanism to boost the much-hailed but rarely realised capacity of the internet to facilitate two-way communication. She calls it a 'fully-fledged experiment in e-democracy' and 'a sort of surveillance activity on local and national British politicians in a way that is being made possible by the tools of new technologies' which permits the 'policing of politicians'. What this bottom-up form of control 'should achieve is, at least ideally, a greater degree of democracy by establishing dialogue with elected representatives as a current and legitimate political practice' (Paganoni 2007, 383). Others briefly discuss WTT in the context of a shift in European societal values in the early 21st century. The main societal value of today, some argue, is that of 'empowerment' which demands that the 20th century 'top-down' state is transformed into a bottom-up state (Frissen et al 2007). WTT is one of the tools that can help with this transformation, others argue in the same vein (Millard 2010). In sum, while WTT has features that do mean it acts as a surveillance mechanism and thereby promotes the 'monitorial citizen' (Schudson 1998), it is firmly anchored in representative democracy. It is not an e-instrument of 'subpolitics' as it is explicitly not 'outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system', as Ulrich Beck defines subpolitics (Beck 1996, 18). Therefore, WTT is not disruptive in its intent and rather supports 'traditional' politics in which an informed citizen communicates their claims to their representatives who exercise a free mandate.

3. The research methods

The article draws on a mixed method 'case study strategy' (Robson 1993, 147). With the case study approach – definable as 'an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a "real life" context' (Simmons 2009, 21) and 'not [as] a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied' (Stake 2005, 443) – qualitative and quantitative methods were chosen. Data was generated via an electronic survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The one-off cross-sectional survey, using mostly closed questions and thereby following a deductive mode of enquiry, was designed and disseminated using SurveyMonkey and was undertaken in May 2014 (for the survey questions see link to SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL online). The author generated an e-mail address data bank of all 129 MSPs and of all members of seven out of 32 Scottish local authority areas (Aberdeen with 44 councillors; Argyle and Bute 35; Glasgow 79; Edinburgh 58; Dumfries and Galloway 33; South Lanarkshire 67; Scottish Borders 31) – without exception, all MSPs and all local councillors in these local authority areas had email-addresses.

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Of these local authority areas, three can be classified as predominantly urban, two as predominantly rural, and two as 'mixed'. Out of a total of 1232 local councillors in Scotland, 347 received a link to the survey. Of these, 40% started to take the survey. However, as the first question was 'Have you heard of WTT?', among the councillors 35% of respondents dropped out as they had no knowledge of WTT at all. The response rate of MSPs was also 40%; however, six percent of these answered 'No' to the same question and therefore dropped out. Survey data was analysed with SPSS and the SurveyMonkey software itself.

The group of respondent MSPs was 'more female' than the Scottish Parliament in 2014; however, of the 52 respondents from amongst MSPs still a majority (61%) were male. Regarding their party affiliation, 56% of respondents identified as members of the SNP, 21% members of the Labour Party and 4% of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. The remaining respondents preferred not to reveal their party affiliation. Again, these percentages are not fully representative of the composition of the Scottish Parliament as it was before the 2015 elections – in this parliament, Labour had 29.5% of seats, the SNP 49.5%, the Conservative Party 11.6% and the Liberal Democrats and Greens 3.9% and 1.6% respectively. Only 42% of the respondents gave information about when they were voted into Parliament for the first time. A quarter of those were from the 2011 elections, 14% from the 2007 elections, 4% from the 2003 elections and 15% had sat in Parliament since the very first elections in 1999.

Of the local councillors who responded, 28% were female and 67% were male. This nearly corresponds with the actual gender divide in Scottish local councils. According to Kenny and Mackay, about 25% of councillors in Scotland are female (Kenny & Mackay, 2012). Party membership of those respondents who volunteered this information was distributed as follows: Labour 36%, SNP 31%, Conservative Party 12%, Green Party 9% and Liberal Democrats 6%. In the 2012 local elections, the SNP gained 34% of all council seat, Labour 32%, the Conservatives 9%, the Liberal democrats 6%; the Greens just over one percent. In the six local authorities surveyed, only 46% of respondents indicated when they had first been elected as councillors: 31% were elected in 2007, 41% in 2007 and 6% in 1999.

In addition to the survey, in June 2014 semi-standardised interviews with four MSPs and eight local councillors were conducted. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. In the analysis of the interviews a set of themes was inductively discovered. The semi-standardised nature of the interviews meant that deductive themes based on expectations and prior knowledge were also developed. These reflected, to some degree, the thinking which guided the survey questions. Throughout the remainder of the article, verbatim quotes from the interviews are made under consideration of interviewees' anonymity. Only whether they are an MSP or a local councillor is

revealed. Some quotes are also taken from the survey which gave participants space for 'free text'.

The e-survey opened in May 2014 and interviews were conducted later in the summer. That means that the research fell into a time when, arguably, politics captured the Scottish public imagination. After all, 2014 was dominated by the run-up to the Scottish referendum on independence, a debate which seemed to politicise many, aroused passions and finally culminated in a high turnout in areas where usually very few voters cast their vote even in general elections.

4. Analysis: Can and does WTT reinforce interactivity between citizens and representatives?

In this section the three hypotheses presented earlier are discussed on the basis of data from e-survey and interviews.

First, it seems that WTT is a well-used e-democracy tool. Both MSPs and local councillors demonstrate a keenness on interacting with WTT users, if this is measured by how many messages received via WTT are replied to. While research by MySociety suggests that the response rates for MSPs and councillors are at 61% and 55% respectively, the e-survey data underlying this article suggests that the response rate is much higher – but this is the self-reported response rate. Out of those MSPs who took the survey, 94% reported that they respond to between 76% and 100% of all messages. Numbers are similar among councillors (Table 1). In short, WTT, as set up by MySociety.org, appears to be accepted by the representatives as they make the step to engage in an exchange with the represented.

Table 1: Out of all messages MSPs and councillors have received, approximately how many have they responded to since 2011? – ABOUT HERE

Drilling deeper into the data, what forms do these exchanges take? Arguably, high levels of interactivity have a requirement for sender and receiver being 'right for each other'. In other words and with regards to WTT, do citizen-users contact the 'right' MSP or local councillor? WTT is set up so that users contact their 'own' elected representative as they are meant to input their own post code which is then matched to constituencies, regions or wards. However, it is possible to input any postcode and then to message the respective representatives outside one's own geographically defined 'electoral space'. Does such 'misappropriation' of WTT, if perhaps seen through the lens of WTT's makers, or such subjective engagement with WTT, if put more neutrally, occur? Responding to the question 'Have you received messages from non-constituents

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via WWT?', 48% of all councillors and 52% of MSPs replied in the affirmative. What happens to these messages? The most frequent approach to dealing with emails from non-constituents is, among MSPs and councillors, the following: 'If they're not a constituent I'll email them and say "Sorry, you're not a constituent" and then give them the details of their MSP' (Interview MSP 1). The notion of geographically defined constituency borders and of 'protocol' which the elected have to follow was a strong theme in the interviews: 'There are borders there for a reason and so my constituents have to come first. […] The protocol prevents me from taking someone's case on that isn't a constituent' (Interview MSP 2). Some MSPs and councillors do respond when the matter is one that is not 'really a constituency matter' but a 'policy matter' on which they or their party have a position.

Why do such contacts to non-constituency MSPs and non-ward councillors happen in the first place? The research shows that many of these contacts occur because WTT users support a public single issue campaign and, to generate more momentum for this campaign, apply what some interviewees referred to as a 'scatter gun approach' to get the campaign message out. This means that WTT users 'copy and paste' a standardised email message into WTT, type in postcodes other than their own, and then contact MSPs or councillors outwith their own constituency, region or ward.

But even when WTT users contact their own constituency, regional or ward representative(s), the impersonal 'copy and paste' campaign email was reported as a frequent occurrence. MSPs and councillors criticised that such use of WTT leads to an impoverishment of communication between elected and represented because, as an MSP said, 'people aren't really saying what they think on WriteToThem – they're just copying and pasting' (Interview MSP 1). One councillor perceives WTT as not much more than a campaigning tool which does not deliver the same kind of personal contact as other forms of media do:

> These things come in sort of blocks, so it depends on some campaign group of telling its members to do this. […]. WriteToThem is almost entirely campaign-based, they're more likely to be getting a response that I have drafted when the first of those campaign emails comes in, whereas everything else [personal email, mail, phone calls, the author] is more likely to be either personal or one-off issues or local issues so they would get an individual reply every time (Interview councillor 1).

An MSP seemed to agree that WTT was often used by campaigning organisations as 'you feel there's a much bigger organisation [..] saying "write to them". You know? And so they do'

(Interview MSP 3). This usage of WTT is implicitly encouraged by MySociety as they allow embedding 'WriteToThem's functionality on your own website, for free' (MySociety 2017). At the same time, MySociety say they have in place a mechanism to block 'copy and paste' emails and encourage users to 'use their own words'. Not all respondents were convinced that such usage of WTT allows much learning about citizen concerns: 'WTT is ideal for special interest groups trying to generate a pressure of numbers in respect of any issue. It seldom in my experience offers an insight into particular constituents and their assessment of the issue subject of messaging' (MSP survey).

However, WTT was also used to contact MSPs and councillors with personal emails about clearly defined issues or more general policy questions. Interviewees suggested that these messages somewhat differ from 'normal email'. An MSP reported that emails 'through WriteToThem are more polite, I guess, and more formal' (Interview MSP 1). A councillor compares emails sent to them directly with those sent via WTT:

> It's not as personalised. It's a case of a line, who they are, and then it's just basically the facts and 'What are you going to do about it?' With this, it's a case of... it's like basically filling in a form and going 'That's my problem. Sort it' (Interview councillor 2).

Messages via WTT were also reported to be more informed than other forms of contacts: 'When research for a response needs to be done, then those emails predominantly tend to be from WriteToThem' (Interview MSP 2). A councillor tells of a similar experience: 'People who write via WriteToThem, I think they're more political. And they're more informed […] than the average person who just is complaining about their bins or something' (Interview councillor 3). Comments such as these and the survey data indicate that if WTT is used as a campaigning tool to 'broadcast' a campaign message to elected representatives, it will not generate interactivity as captured by van Dijk's matrix. WTT then becomes little more than a one-way communication tool which does not seek a response from MSPs or councillors. Similarly, when emails are only used to get the MSP or councillor 'to sort it', then this indicates that the represented does not expect interactivity from the representative and treats them as if they stood under an imperative mandate.

For WTT to enable higher levels of interactivity between representatives and represented, its objective communication capacities and its intersubjective characteristics need to work in tandem. So far the analysis has shown that many citizen-users ascribe WTT different

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intersubjective characteristics than WTT's makers hoped for and the representatives may expect. After all, citizen-users ignore and circumvent the structural 'more or less objective' properties of WTT and thus reduce, at least in some instances, the chances of starting interaction with representatives.

In the following, further data on how MSPs and local councillors perceive WTT is presented, with Hypothesis H3 on interactivity and the represented-representative relationship in the foreground. Relevant survey data is captured in Table 2.

Table 2: What do you think of WTT? – ABOUT HERE

Regarding the general proposition that WTT improves communication between the elected and citizens, 45% of MSPs and 38% of councillors agree that 'WTT is great for communication'. However, more respondents indicate that they 'neither agree nor disagree' with this statement. One local councillor said that

> WTT has not improved contacts to my constituents. No. I think getting emails, people will happily tell you a story. They then, if you go back, if you need more information and say 'Can you provide me with a contact number that I can speak with you on?' they'll do that. I wouldn't do that with WriteToThem just... generally, because of the tone that we've had so far or I've had so far with some of the emails. I mean, you're responsible for everything. The weather, that's the councillors' fault (Interview councillor 1).

Some interviewees were more positive about WTT and ICT-based communication means generally. They describe WTT as one mechanism among others to communicate with citizens: 'I think WriteToThem and things like that are really helpful because it means I have contact, however fleeting, with a wider range of people' (Interview councillor 1). Another councillor adds: 'I think that has made it possible for people to get in touch with us in lots of different ways and WriteToThem is great in that it has made it... if it has made it more accessible, if people find us that way then I think that's great' (Interview councillor 4). An MSP said that

> for me there are two categories to it – there's the person who doesn't necessarily know how to be engaged in politics and searches on the internet to find out how on

earth they would contact their representative. They've never heard of their representative. You can tell in that email, that person's done that. But you can also tell from the second group that they know exactly how to contact you and they know what they want and when you should be back at them (Interview MSP 2).

Among the most important survey results was data which show that WTT is of limited use for fulfilling the 'constituency service role' (Searing 1985). When asked whether the emails they receive through WTT have allowed them a better insight into issues that troubled their constituents, just over a third of MSPs and only 22% of councillors indicated that thanks to WTT they had a better insight into what concerns citizens. There were similar low opinions of WTT in terms of its ability to revitalise democracy via facilitating contact and communication. Only 20% of MSPs and 22% of councillors agreed with the proposition that WTT revitalises democracy. An unexpected theme which emerged from the interviews is that of 'competition' created through WTT messages when they are sent to all members of a multi-member local council ward or to the constituency MSP and other regional list MSPs whose geographical representative responsibilities overlap. Such competition is not always seen as positive. One councillor said:

Generally, if emails come via WriteToThem they come to all three councillors and I have to confess I have an issue with when it comes to all three of us, I don't know if the other two have responded, so I'm also aware that there's a kind of political element at play here because if I respond all the time and people go 'Wow, that Labour councillor is fantastic. I'll always go to her' and if the others are doing the same thing then how do we ever know that...? We're actually causing the council more work by three of us responding and three of us answering it (Interview councillor 4).

An MSP commented: 'And particularly around election time you know that maybe the candidate or whatever that you're standing against has already responded. The answer will still be the same but, yeah, you respond as quickly as you can, absolutely' (Interview MSP 2). A councillor also makes a link between speed of response and electoral cycle: 'Although what you would probably find, but not me in particular, is nearer an election I think councillors are more aware, they're more responsive and they're probably quicker at responses' (Interview councillor 4).
Do interviewees see this form of competition over 'response times' as a negative development? A councillor says:

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I don't think it's a bad thing to have councillors fighting over the attention of constituents. From the constituent's point of view, it means that, whereas previously writing to your lone councillor, that person might not be very effective. […] there's a wee bit more pressure on us to do well with it but that's only a good thing (Interview councillor 6).

However, WTT, just like emails, seems to create expectations of immediate response: 'Obviously, then they expect an immediate response from me' (Interview MSP 1). A councillor confirms: 'People don't want to wait. You should always email back, just to keep the conversation going, even to just say "I don't know but I'll find out"' (Interview councillor 4). However, speed of response under pressure from upcoming elections does not necessarily lead to interactivity as understood in van Dijk's model. Rather, it can lead to the elected simply responding to citizens' demands – or appear to be responding to them – without deliberating with the citizen over the nature of their demand.

This leads to the discussion of whether WTT stimulates iterative two-way communication between represented and representative and thereby high levels of interactivity. However, this expectation was disappointed. A councillor stated that 'in my experience I've found that one reply is usually enough because I, obviously, acknowledge and thank them, maybe a courtesy for contacting me, but I always make sure I respond' (Interview councillor 5). This might be a consequence of the technical system, i.e. email:

You get one email and then you reply and then you lose them at that. […] nobody really wants to get into a huge discussion, like, by emailing these things either. I would not want a discussion like that to happen. If they had more to discuss about something and they wanted to chat something through I would arrange to meet up with them (Interview councillor 6).

MSPs share this experience: 'It tends to be silence because of the campaigns [i.e. copy and paste messages as part of campaigns, the author] but you might get one or two coming back and saying "Well, I disagree with you" or they become abusive then' (Interview MSP 2) – at which point the representative can be expected to end the exchange as reciprocation of abuse is not an option for a politician, as Rebekah Tromble found in her research on politicians' usage of Twitter (2016). According to one interviewee, e-mailing does not seem to lend itself to open-minded

deliberation: 'Yeah, yes, we sometimes do that, yeah. Yes. But it wouldn't go on for great, long periods of time because if they have a very set view and we have a very set view then basically you have to agree to differ, really' (Interview MSP 4).

Is this the same with all email traffic to councillors or MSPs? One councillor said:

> That is different with other forms of communication. I can have pen friends now with a lot of my constituents. Because they're going backwards and forwards and 'While I've got you there's this issue' or there's that issue or somebody down the road has an issue. [..] It's a spin-off from that. But WriteToThem's just... it's different. I think it's an issue basis' (Interview councillor 2).

5. Conclusion: a disappointing e-democracy tool

Since its creation, the internet has been hailed by some as an instrument that can 'fix' representative democracy or make possible deliberative democracy on a mass scale. On the opposite side, some have even pondered the question whether 'democracy can survive the internet' (Persily 2017). Amongst the modest claims about the potential positive impacts of the internet on democratic practice is that it can facilitate higher levels of interactivity between represented and representatives as a crucial pre-condition for a more legitimate 'thick form' of representative democracy (Coleman 2006; Ferguson & Griffiths 2006). This is also the claim that underlies WTT, albeit implicitly. This article investigated, using survey and interview data and applying van Dijk's heuristic matrix and associated concepts, whether such a claim can be made for this specific e-democracy tool.

Before conclusions are reached on the research objective, it is important to point out some limitations of the article. For example, the data generated through survey and interviews makes no claim of being representative of MSPs or Scottish local councillors so that all interpretations of the data were made cautiously. Also, the data was produced in 2014 – since then usage of WTT by citizens and representatives – and, after elections in 2016 and 2017, the representatives themselves – might have changed and with them internet usage patterns.

What are the conclusions then? Regarding Hypotheses 1 and 2 – referring to WTT's objective communication capacities and inter-subjective characteristics respectively – WTT could reinforce interactivity up to the highest of the four levels outlined by van Dijk: it allows reactions to actions, it allows near-synchronous communication, it allows control change and it allows internet-mediated face-to-face communication. That such a tool to foster the relationship between

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the represented and their representatives would not go amiss in Scotland (and the UK) is demonstrated by data showing that only few people in Britain have ever contacted their elected representatives while many more indicate they 'would do' (Hansard 2016, 27). However, the data presented here shows that only very rarely the instigators of a communication via WTT – i.e. the citizen-users – make use of its objective 'communication capacities'. For example, barely do they move communication beyond the initial email and the representative's response. Instead, many WTT citizen-users, despite attempts by MySociety to block such usage, send 'copy and paste' emails written by campaign organisations. There are only very few reported instances of email-based iterative exchanges on the basis of an initial WTT contact and it seems that such engagement, when it happens, is often not very fruitful from the perspective of the representative. The finding of the lack of such communication echoes research on representatives' usage of Twitter – it is mostly one-way communication with citizens rarely expecting that representatives engages in a reciprocal dialogue (Tromble 2016).

Regarding Hypothesis 3 (H3) on the question of higher levels of interactivity and the relationship between the represented and the representatives, neither MSPs nor local councillors indicate that WTT has created high levels of interactivity between them and citizens or that they have the impression that their engagement via WTT has increased trust in politicians, as something that could be considered an important pre-condition for interactivity. Given that trust in politicians is rather low, the data presented here confirms that 'the internet' per se cannot stimulate democracy or revitalise the relationship between the represented and the representative, as cyber-optimists have hoped.

Beyond these findings, there seems to be a problematic contradiction of WTT *de facto* acting as a monitoring mechanism of the elected while, at least ostensibly, being marketed as a tool to 'lower the barriers to taking the first civic or democratic steps in a citizen's life' (MySociety 2015a) by facilitating interactivity between elected and electors. After all, it is by no means certain that a mechanism for 'policing the politicians' adds to a 'greater degree of democracy', as Paganoni (2007, 383) assumes. And while WTT's objective communication capacities suffice for high levels of interactivities, it is not only the citizens but also the elected who may understand WTT quite differently than its makers and therefore use it in differing ways.

Out of this observation a recommendation arises, based on the mismatch of the internet and representative institutions 'that were not built for each other' (Hilbert 2009, 92). Some councillors and MSPs voiced unease about the fact that MySociety does not consult them over running WTT or their inclusion in its email database:

> I would be in favour of more communication with MySociety.org because I've never had communication from them. So, they're asking me to engage on a site with constituents but they've never actually engaged with me to tell me what the purpose of the site is, what they expect of me, how they rate things (Interview MSP 2).

While this criticism of MySociety has not led to a boycott of WTT by councillors or MSPs, e-democracy innovations designed to improve interactivity between representatives and represented ought to be considered legitimate by both sides. Otherwise they might contribute to the existing distrust in parliaments and their members, e.g. when a representative chooses not to engage with an e-democracy tool such as WTT on the basis of misgivings about its technical setup or how it communicates impressions about them to the public. Consultations between the makers of e-democracy tools and representatives are of particular importance because, while the internet has indeed permeated the day-to-day work of the elected, they continue to not see the internet as a means to 'respond to contentious local policy questions, or to enter into any visible, meaningful, political debate with their constituents'. Rather they wish to use the internet as an instrument to 'publish, and not to engage' (Williamson 2009, 525; Tromble 2016). In other words, while some citizens may desire open and frank communication with their representatives, the latter are justifiably wary of such communication. And maybe for good reason. After all, those parliaments which present themselves as most transparent and accessible are the least trusted (Leston-Bandeira 2012, 515), and representatives who eschew engaging in network-mediated interactivity with the represented can avoid situations characterised by conflict and abuse in which they, but also representative democracy, stand to gain little.

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I responded to % of all messages.	Percent MSPs (N)	Percent councillors (N)
76-100%	94 (45)	92 (78)
51-75%	-	6 (5)

26-50%	6 (3)	-
None	-	2 (2)
Total	48	85

Table 1: Out of all messages you have received, approximately how many have you (MSPs and councillors) responded to since 2011?

	Strongly disagree (% /N)		Disagree (%/N)		Neither agree nor disagree (%/N)		Agree (%/N)		Strongly agree (%/N)	
	MSPs	Councillors	MSPs	Councillors	MSPs	Councillors	MSPs	Councillors	MSPs	Councillors
WTT is great for communicating with citizens.	3% (1)	5% (4)	16% (8)	14% (12)	35% (17)	42% (35)	45% (22)	38% (32)	0% (0)	2% (2)
WTT makes elected representatives more accountable.	3% (1)	8% (7)	17% (8)	20% (17)	53% (26)	24% (20)	27% (13)	49% (42)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT revitalises representative democracy.	3% (1)	9% (8)	17% (8)	18% (15)	60% (29)	50% (42)	20% (10)	23% (20)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT builds trust between voters and representatives.	6% (3)	8% (7)	16% (8)	14% (12)	52% (25)	62% (52)	26% (12)	17% (14)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT puts more pressure on me to respond immediately than other forms of contact.	17% (8)	20% (17)	37% (18)	37% (32)	40% (19)	37% (32)	7% (3)	5% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT puts me under permanent scrutiny.	7% (3)	15% (13)	28% (14)	31% (26)	59% (28)	49% (42)	7% (3)	5% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT allows me to convince constituents of my policies and politics.	7% (3)	8% (7)	14% (7)	32% (27)	55% (26)	45% (38)	24% (12)	15% (13)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT contributes to an increasing lack of respect for politicians.	10% (5)	8% (7)	50% (24)	28% (23)	40% (19)	37% (32)	0% (0)	27% (23)	0% (0)	0% (0)
WTT allows me to understand better the concerns of	7% (3)	9% (8)	13% (6)	28% (23)	45% (22)	42% (36)	35% (17)	21% (18)	0% (0)	0% (0)

citizens in my constituency or region or ward.

Table 2 – What do you think of WTT? MSPs and councillors