Networking for democracy
an analysis of the needs of the UK democracy sector and proposals for new networking efforts

Summary and recommendations

Joe Mitchell
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Our democracy faces serious challenges. Substantial new efforts are required to counter those challenges — and to build upon and improve our democracy. One of the most effective ways to support this work is to connect the efforts of those pursuing such goals.

This report is the result of two months of interviews across the sector and a small literature review. Thanks are due to everyone who gave their time to be interviewed and to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for funding the work.

There is such a thing as a democracy sector. Most interviewees agreed that there was a sector, that they were part of it, and they recognised that this linked them with others pursuing democratic ideals. Further research is required to better delineate the boundaries of the sector: depending on your definition of democracy, it could include almost every campaigning organisation. Indeed, some interviewees thought that that level of inclusivity should be a deliberate goal for any networking effort. Questions remain over other divides between organisations in the space: should the networking efforts be aimed at creating a stronger UK-wide network, or nation-specific networks? Are distinct efforts needed to connect those outside London?

There was wide agreement that the sector is weaker than it should be. There are particular issues around working together. Interviewees suggested the sector was small, fragmented, under-funded, lacked vision, lacked clear policy asks, struggled to engage the public, was short-termist and guarded or competitive. The cause of such problems relates both to a lack of existing collaboration, trust or social capital, but may also be structural, relating to how the sector is funded and the abstract and contested nature of democracy. On the plus side, some interviewees spotted opportunities around outsized influence and around a growing awareness of the democratic deficit.

Aside from funding, the needs of organisations in the sector are multiple. The most frequent response concerned better connections within the sector, followed by connections outside the sector. Greater influencing power, greater sharing of information, operational assistance and better public engagement were the next most popular. Some interviewees mentioned sector-wide organising and evaluation. Interviewees were asked to briefly consider what they could offer the network, which mostly included access to politicians, the media or academics.

The literature on network science suggests how some of these needs might be met. More densely connected networks can share information or knowledge more rapidly; broader networks can connect insiders and outsiders; the thicker the bonds between organisations the more likely they are to collaborate on projects,

taking advantage of each other's strengths, reducing duplication. Any efforts at networking would not 'create' a network, because it already exists. The goal instead is to 'weave' more and better connections between organisations in the space, as well as to introduce new organisations or 'nodes' to the network.

The capacity of the sector to take part in networking efforts is limited, but most respondents were keen to engage in some form. Some suggested they would need a fairly instant return; others recognised that returns may be slower. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations should be mobilised to support better networking efforts. When asked about the best communication tools (imagining the simplest networking efforts to be the provision of a mailing list, forum or online chat), there was little agreement on the right platform, other than that whatever platforms are used, they must be moderated and kept up-to-date. Twitter was held up by several as a useful tool for networking.

Several recent attempts have been made to better network the sector. These include campaigns, central hubs and events. To some extent, the lesson appears to be that the more you put in, the more you get out: the better resourced central hubs and conferences have kept going for longer and added more value, while attempts at informal events (which may be vital for building social connections) have been harder to sustain.

The democracy sector can learn from other sectors on what works for networking. The report highlights some goal-driven efforts and some communities of practice, from Crisis Action's handbook on coalition-building, to New Economy Organisers Network's iterative see-what-works approach. #OneTeamGov, a network of civil servants, provides an example of a light, decentralised approach to networking. A recent, more in-depth research report on the migration sector identifies very similar 'network infrastructure' needs.

A full list of recommendations for the sector, existing hubs and funders is provided below. These were developed from ideas provided by the interviewees, the literature and the report author's reflections on how to support better networking and collaboration.

The next steps for better networking include deciding how best to resource and organise such efforts. It makes sense to start at the thinner, less expensive end of networking efforts, while also giving the efforts enough time to prove themselves useful or not. Efforts could be centralised or decentralised, and there are pros and cons to each approach; it may be necessary to begin with a centralised approach before gradually becoming more decentralised. There is some disagreement on whether it is sufficient to simply provide a platform or space to organise, or whether a direction needs to be set in advance. The geographic or jurisdictional scope of the network should be considered, as well as the openness of the network. The report suggests a range of roles that could be given to a central hub or to a range of organisations working in a decentralised way. Funding for the efforts could be provided by a pooled resource model, and ideally should do, in the long run. In the short run, at least, such efforts are likely to need startup capital from funders.

Measuring the success of the networking efforts will be difficult, but not impossible. Regular social network mapping and surveys of the sector will help gain a sense of whether the sector is becoming better connected.

There are risks to making renewed efforts at networking. The efforts could: fail to result in better engagement; encourage poor quality collaboration; create additional work for members; rely too much on a small number of individuals; or create an exclusionary network that weakens the sector. All of these risks can be mitigated.

It is clear that this sector can be more than the sum of its parts, but only if requisite efforts are made to join it up. There is much to do, and the most significant benefits of better networking could take years to realise. So let's start now.

List of recommendations

Recommendations to the sector

A. Share information:
   1. Collaborate on drawing the social graph of organisations working on democracy;
   2. Collaborate on an online democracy sector handbook, which could include: a directory of organisations; links to research; links to data; case studies; lists of funders, press contacts, political roles; upcoming democracy 'events'; and policy tracking;
   3. Establish a shared forum/mailing-list.

B. Build community:
   4. Create a range of standing meetings to be used to discuss challenges, asks and offers, training;
   5. Trial 'action learning groups' among peer groups;
   6. Create cross-sector buddying or mentorship, especially for new staff;
   7. Consider co-organising an annual festival for democracy;
   8. Establish a space to discuss the sector's policy asks.

C. Coordinate and build consensus:
   9. Create a shared calendar of organisational plans, such as planned press releases, to better coordinate and reduce duplication;
   10. Collaborate on a list of who is applying for what funding;
   11. Create cross-sector coordination groups of directors, and board members, to review organisational goals;
   12. Collaborate on a sectoral audit to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;
   13. Regularly run horizon-scanning or scenario-planning workshops to prepare the sector for the future;
   14. Develop a shared understanding of what a good democracy looks like in the UK;
   15. Develop corresponding metrics and sectoral goals;
   16. Develop a sector-wide policy platform, with a view to influencing the 2024 manifestos;
   17. Develop shared understanding of better communications framing.

D. Collaborate:
   18. Pool a proportion of turnover to fund a network hub;

19. Make joint funding bids for collaborative projects;
20. Share working and events spaces;
21. Pool operations, influencing, press and evaluation functions;
22. Adopt sector-wide communications framing;
23. Pool resources for polling, focus groups and audience segmentation;
24. Approach all of the above with an experimental mindset: test what works, but give efforts sufficient time to either bed-in or to clearly fail.

Recommendations to the existing hubs in the sector

25. Create a quarterly 'convening of convenors' to bring together the clusters in the sector.

Recommendations for any new hub

26. Support the sector in all of the above tasks, based on regular reviews of need;
27. Perform a librarian role for any collaborative documentation;
28. Perform a matchmaking role by introducing relevant parties within the sector;
29. Perform a signposting role for any new entrants;
30. Provide funding and technical support for running online meetings or events;
31. Ensure that new information or resources are shared across different platforms, allowing network members to opt-in according to preference;
32. Consider the physical location (if any) of a hub carefully, with a presumption against a main base in London;
33. Provide mediation or conflict resolution resources;
34. Offer work and/or events space for the sector across the UK (or organise the availability of such);
35. Provide corporate governance or fiscal sponsorship for startups, one-off projects or campaigns, and consider incubation or acceleration support;
36. Exemplify the culture desired from the sector: be open, generous and effective.

Recommendations to funders

37. Provide startup or matched funding to a network hub, hosted by a specialised organisation;
38. Use the social graph of organisations to identify and fill gaps;
39. Consider longer-term core funding of organisations;
40. Consider incentivising collaboration through grants;
41. Consider a more open grant application process, allowing people to see overlap earlier in the development of projects.

FULL REPORT

The full report is available as a Google Document, to allow for ongoing comments, corrections and clarifications, and can be accessed here.

Joe Mitchell (twitter, website)
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