



WriteToThem.com

Analysis of users and usage for UK Citizens Online Democracy

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About this report

This report was commissioned by UK Citizens Online Democracy as part of an evaluation of the major mySociety websites.

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Executive Summary

About

WriteToThem.com is a website that allows everyone to work out who their elected representatives are and to send them messages. Originally launched in February 2000 as FaxYourMP.com it now covers UK political representatives on all levels, starting from local councillors and regional assemblies, right up to the national parliament in Westminster and the House of Lords, as well as the European parliament.

Cost

Back in 2005, the development of WriteToThem cost almost £25,000, which is substantial compared to the other major mySociety sites. However, its £8,400, annual maintenance costs are on the same level as FixMyStreet or Pledgebank – the cheaper mySociety sites.

Usage

Since 2007 visits to the site have remained fairly stable: 50-70,000 visits (40-50,000 unique visitors) every month, which makes WriteToThem the third most popular mySociety site. Most usage occurs on weekdays during working hours. Around two-thirds of visitors to the site do at least type in their postcode to see a list of their representatives. Of those, more than 50% will then go all the way and send a message to their representative. In recent years at least 100,000 people every year (based on unique email addresses) used the site to send messages to representatives. The record to date is 2009 when 130,000 people used the site more than 175,000 times to send almost 230,000 messages. Usage was lower in 2010 due to the general election – for several weeks of the year there were formally no MPs to send messages to. Usage peaks can usually be attributed to popular campaigns. The busiest day recorded to date on WriteToThem (28 April 2009) was caused by a newspaper campaign urging its readers to contact their MPs about citizenship rights for Gurkha soldiers. The main use of the site is to send messages to Members of Parliament: seven out of ten visitors send a message to an MP, with the remaining 30% contacting other politicians. In 2009 this resulted in an average of four messages per week to every individual MP. Based on a small and informal survey of MPs, this is a small fraction of overall email communication that MPs receive. Nationally representative survey data suggests that roughly 3m people in Britain had used the Internet to contact a politician within the last twelve months. The 130,000 people who have used WriteToThem in 2009 can account for less than 5% of this overall audience.

Use frequency

About 15% of users return to the site within a twelve-month period to use it again. Overall around 30% of users are loyal users who have used the site before. While there is a core group of around 1,000 people who have used the site every year in the last four years, most of the loyal users have considerable gaps of one or more years in their usage. Usage seems concentrated on

particular events, during which people send many messages but otherwise seldom come to the site.

Traffic sources

About half of the respondents in the user survey indicated that they came to WriteToThem via search engines. This is supported by a targeted Google Adwords campaign that is estimated to have resulted in about 15% of overall search engine related traffic. Another third of users find out about the site through personal recommendation or other campaigning websites, and only a few users cited information from the media. In recent years the most important driver of traffic to the site were links from other websites, which account for more than 40% of all visits. Almost 20% of all visits to WriteToThem originate from TheyWorkForYou.com, another mySociety site with information about representatives, which makes it the single most important source of traffic next to Google.

Responsiveness of representatives

Almost 60% of messages sent via WriteToThem get a reply but there is considerable difference between the types of representatives addressed. While MPs answer about 60% of messages they receive, users sending a message to an MEP have less than a 50% chance of actually receiving a reply. About half of the messages sent to a councillor get a reply, a rate that has remained fairly stable throughout the years. Response rates of MPs as well as MEPs have declined in 2010 but it is not clear whether this is a new trend or simply a side effect of the general election. User comments indicate that replying to constituents' messages can have a real benefit for representatives while ignoring them can come at a real cost. The majority of users are satisfied with the response they received from their representative. What citizens like are quick responses and personal replies. What puts them off are short or standard responses that evade the question or suggest the constituent is not being taken seriously.

User satisfaction

Overall the survey showed a high level of satisfaction with the site. More than four out of five users would recommend the site to a friend or a colleague. The proportion of returning users also indicates a certain satisfaction with the site. What users particularly like is the ease of use, the opportunity to find out about one's representatives in the first place and that WriteToThem actually keeps tabs on the responsiveness of representatives. However, for better or worse, user satisfaction with the site is very much tied to the responsiveness of representatives. If users received a reply that answered their question they tended to be overwhelmingly positive, however, much less so if they perceived the reply as unsatisfactory or if they did not receive an answer at all.

User description²

By their own admission WriteToThem users are by and large not very politically involved. First of all, two in five users have never before contacted one of their political representatives. What is more, WriteToThem users are also not more politically active than the average Internet user (based on the nationally representative sample from OxIS 2009) 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.

However, the overall demographics of these users extend the traditional biases in political participation: compared to the profile of British Internet users, WriteToThem users are twice as likely to have a higher degree and are twice as often on a higher income (more than £37,500 per year). Apart from this, WriteToThem attracts more male users and those 45 years and older, while Internet users younger than 35 are less likely to use the site. In particular, teenagers (<18 years) stay largely out of reach - they account for only one in a hundred users. Low-income groups including the unemployed are well represented, a sign of success in reaching out to the poorer citizens and not just a side effect of a young people or student involvement. In part the reported biases mirror traditional patterns of engagement in this particular form of political participation as comparative data show that people who have contacted a politician via any means are similarly biased towards men or high-income groups. At the same time WriteToThem extends some of these already present biases, for example the overrepresentation of people with higher education and those in the 55-64 age bracket.

Marked differences exist between people who contact local councillors and other users. The local level shows clearest signs of engaging participants from usually underrepresented 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%) and lack a higher degree (56%).

² Data on users of the website is derived from an online user survey conducted between 15 May 2009 and 28 February 2010. It contains responses from 5,702 users (response rate at least 40%) and is broadly representative of the people invited to the survey. However, it does exclude those users who only used the site to send a bulk identical message to several representatives of the same level (e.g. all MEPs) at once.

WriteToThem's success in achieving its own goals

Goal 1: to make it easier for citizens to get in touch with their political representatives

The comments of users highlight that they particularly like the ease of use of the site and the opportunity to find out about one's representatives in the first place.

Goal 2: to establish a dialogue between constituent and representative

About half of the users who received a response from their representative have indicated that they want to reply, so usage of WriteToThem is not just a one off but has the potential to create a dialogue. This is most marked for the local level with 73% of users wanting to reply to their local councillor while only about a third of users plan to reply to their MEP.

General goals of mySociety:

Goal 3: to build websites that give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives as well as to teach the public and voluntary sectors, through demonstration, how to use the internet most efficiently to improve lives.

mySociety has succeeded in building a site that enables the majority of users to establish a contact with their representative that satisfies them. Users say the site is easy to use and the large majority of them would recommend it to friends and colleagues.

Goal 4: to reach a representative share of the (Internet) population and activate people who would otherwise not get engaged

The analysis of users has shown three broad tendencies:

- i) The website activates a large share of people who are not otherwise politically involved. In particular, many of them have never before contacted a representative at all.
- ii) Those that do get engaged are largely drawn from parts of the population that are already more likely to be politically active, in essence extending biases already present in the activity of contacting politicians and political participation more generally.
- iii) Important differences exist in terms of the level of government which is addressed via WriteToThem. The local level shows not only the clearest signs of engagement but also of engagement by usually less well represented groups.

1 Site Description

WriteToThem.com is a website that allows everyone to find out who their elected representatives are and to send them messages. It is free to use and covers UK political representatives on all levels, from local councillors, regional assemblies, the national parliament in Westminster (as well as the House of Lords) right up to the European parliament. With the help of the website contacting representatives is very easy: citizens only need to type in their post code and then select from a list the representative(s) they want to contact as shown in Figure 1 below.

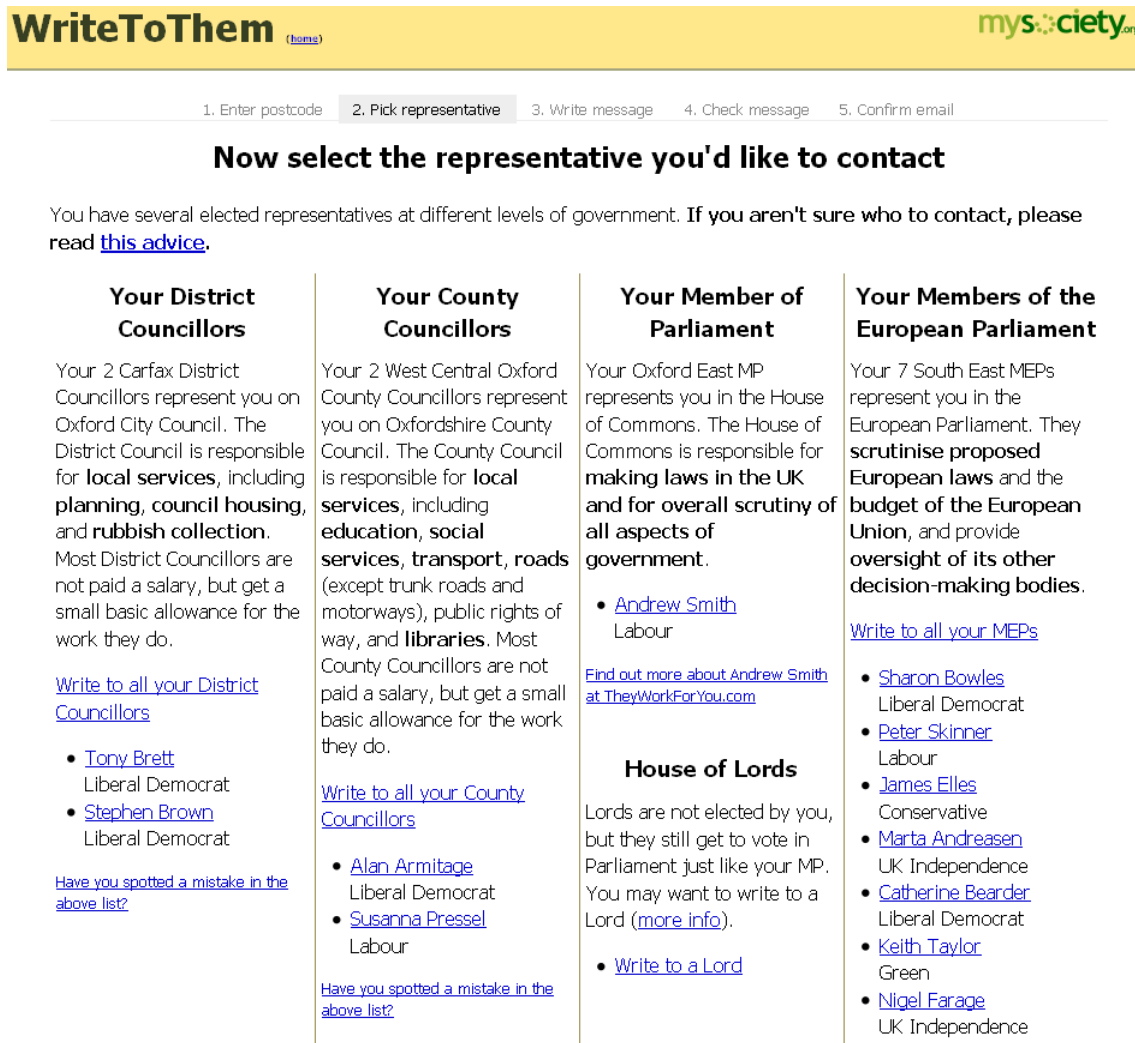


Figure 1: Screenshot of WriteToThem interface (March 2011)

After selecting the individual representative (or group of representatives at the same level), users can write their message on screen which will subsequently get delivered to the appropriate email address of the selected representative(s). For a number of representatives, the messages sent via WriteToThem will actually be faxed instead of emailed if this is what representatives prefer or if they are not actively using email.

Goals of Site

The main goal of WriteToThem and in fact the only one formally stated on its website is to make it easier for citizens to get in touch with their political representatives³. Furthermore a couple of other motivations emerged from a number of informal interviews with those people at mySociety who are involved in running the site. These goals are to establish a dialogue between constituent and representative as well as to let representatives focus on genuine emails (and not on sorting out spam) by preventing mass emailing of copy-and-paste letters.

Underlying these goals are mySociety's two main official missions. The first is to be a charitable project which builds websites that give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives. The second is to teach the public and voluntary sectors, through demonstration, how to use the internet most efficiently to improve lives. These official goals are again supplemented by goals that are not necessarily explicitly stated but that seem to be inherent in many of the discussions among the mySociety community. These centre around activating people who would otherwise not get engaged and more broadly in reaching a representative share of the (Internet) population.

1.1 History

The history of WriteToThem dates back to February 2000 when Tom Loosemore and Stuart Tily built a first version of FaxYourMP.com which allowed people to send a fax to their MP over the Web. It was officially launched on 29 November 2000⁴. By 2004 it had delivered more than 100,000 faxes. In the meantime, Tom Steinberg set up mySociety with the help of many people including some of those behind FaxYourMP. It was agreed to move responsibility for running the site to mySociety, which re-launched the site under the new name WriteToThem.com in February 2005. The website now allowed citizens to send email messages to the following kinds of representatives:

- Members of Parliament (i.e. House of Commons)
- Members of the European Parliament
- Councillors (District & County)
- Members of the Scottish Parliament
- Welsh Assembly Members
- London Assembly Members

In 2006, representatives in the following assemblies were added too:

- Northern Ireland Assembly (February 2006)
- House of Lords (April 2006)

³ See the "About Us" page at WriteToThem: <http://www.writetothem.com/about-us>

⁴ For the original announcement see Need to Know: <http://www.ntk.net/2000/12/01/>, see also BBC coverage at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1055881.stm>

While the original FaxYourMP.com was built by a group of volunteers and many people have contributed to WriteToThem over the years the lead maintainers of the site are now mySociety core developers Matthew Somerville and Louise Crow. Section 1.3 Size & Cost outlines the efforts involved in developing and maintaining the site.

1.2 Awards & Media

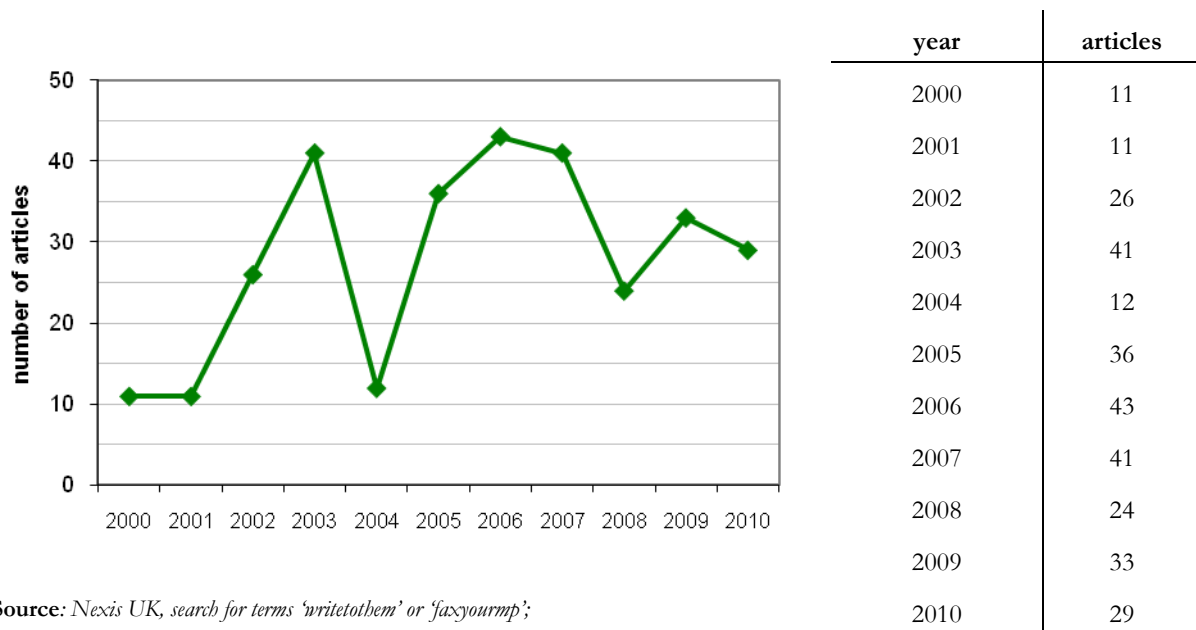
From early on the site has picked up a number of awards as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Awards received by WriteToThem / FaxYourMP

year	award	description
2006	New Statesman Media Award	Contribution to Civic Society Award ⁵
2004	Future Publishing Internet Hero Award	Internet Hero Award ⁶
2001	New Statesman Media Award	BT Overall Merit Award ⁷
2001	New Media Age Award	Best use of the web ⁸

The website is also regularly mentioned in newspapers, mainly in the UK, but coverage is varying.

Figure 2: Articles in English Language news mentioning ‘writetothem’ or ‘faxyourmp’ (2000 - 2010)



Source: Nexis UK, search for terms ‘writetothem’ or ‘faxyourmp’;

Coverage in the blogosphere is greater even though unfortunately precise information on the number of blog posts mentioning ‘writetothem’ is not reliably available because Google Blogsearch

⁵ <http://www.newstatesman.com/nma/nma2006/nma2006winners.php>

⁶ http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/11/12/futur_awards/

⁷ <http://www.newstatesman.com/nma/nma2003winners2001.htm>

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2001/jun/15/newmedia1>

(as the only blog search engine that also offers historic search) is somewhat unspecific in determining blog posts. However, as an indication of the coverage in the blogosphere Google Blogsearch reports that in 2010 about 1,300 posts mentioned ‘*writetothem*’.

1.3 Size & Cost

The development of WriteToThem cost almost £25,000, which makes it one of the more expensive mySociety projects, but also resulted in a larger code base. However, in terms of maintenance costs, WriteToThem is one of the cheaper sites of mySociety with annual running costs on the same level as FixMyStreet or Pledgebank.

Table 2: Development and maintenance cost of major mySociety projects

	WriteToThem	TheyWorkForYou	Pledgebank	ePetitions ⁹	FixMyStreet	WhatDoTheyKnow
start of development	01.08.2004	01.06.2003	01.01.2005	24.04.2006	01.09.2006	01.08.2007
official launch	14.02.2005	06.06.2004	13.06.2005	14.11.2006	07.03.2007	22.02.2008
<i>development</i>						
man hours	1,288	1,500	833	651	315	760
development cost	£24,080	£5,000	£16,280	£18,764	£6,660	£23,750
lines of code (incl. markup) ^{a)}	85,404	298,078	19,359	31,440	15,670	210,939
<i>maintenance (annually)</i>						
server & bandwidth	£1,000	£1,000	£1,000	£1,000	£1,000	£1,000
developer support (days)	8	48	8	8	8	20
labour cost	£2,400	£14,400	£2,400	£2,400	£2,400	£6,000
backups and other support cost ^{b)}	£5,000	£5,000	£5,000	£5,000	£5,000	£5,000
total annual maintenance cost	£8,400	£20,400	£8,400	£8,400	£8,400	£12,000

Source: mySociety

Notes: Numbers reflect state of affairs in 2010. ^{a)} as of February 2011, does not reflect a number of libraries shared between projects; as with all mySociety projects the source code is open source, in the case of WriteToThem under a BSD-style license, ^{b)} rather than just static state backups, mySociety works through a regular programme of testing, including recreating sites and services totally from the back-ups in place to make sure they are robust and appropriate.

⁹ Online petitions of the UK Prime Minister, available at <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>. Since May 2010 it is no longer possible for members of the public to create and sign new petitions, but mySociety still maintains the searchable archive of former petitions available from the Prime Minister’s website.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's e-innovations fund awarded £250,000 to a partnership between mySociety and West Sussex County Council of which mySociety received £196,000 to develop a number of projects including WriteToThem. In addition, a database of local councillors was obtained from GovEval. WriteToThem also gets some support through a Google grant for free Google Adwords campaigns which amounted to about \$20,000 in 2010 (see section 2.3.1 Advertising & Marketing).

2 Site Usage

2.1 Visitor & User Statistics

Basic web stats for the site are available since January 2006 based on the logfile analyzer AWStats¹⁰. Since September 2008 web stats are also collected using Piwik¹¹ which employs a page-tagging technology comparable to Google Analytics. Figure 3 shows the development of (unique) visits to the website.

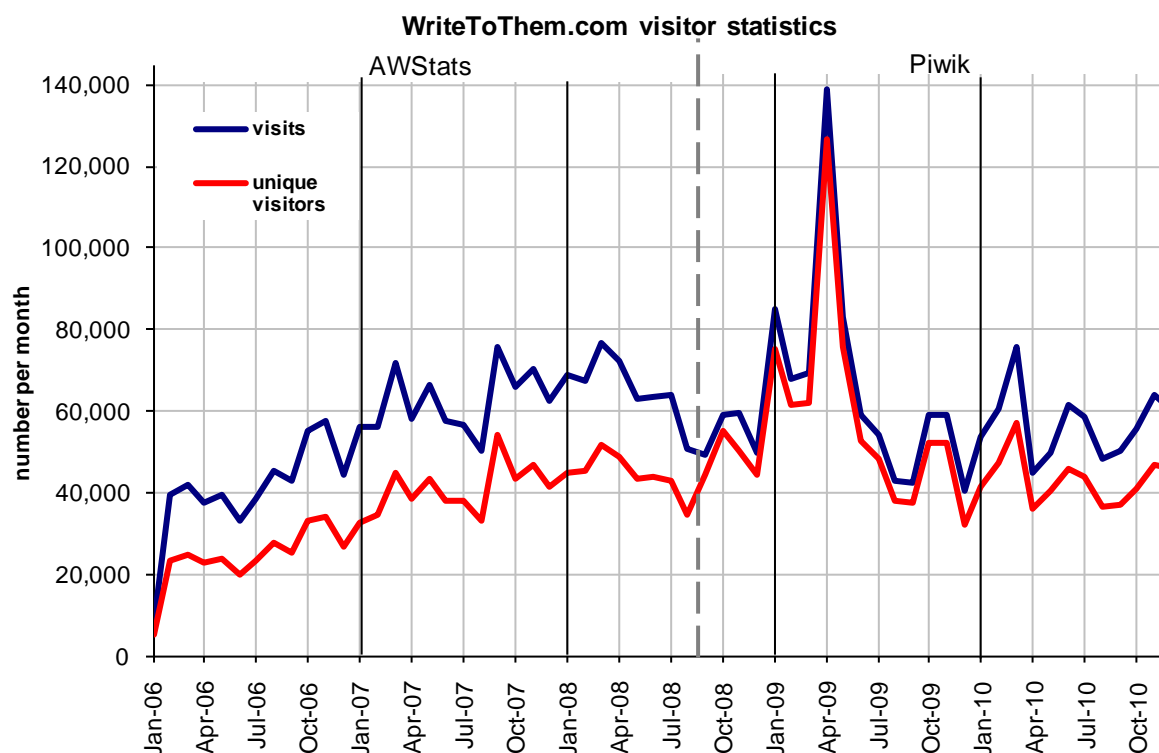


Figure 3: Monthly visits and unique visitors to WriteToThem (January 2006 - December 2010)

Source: mySociety AWStats, mySociety Piwik web analytics

Since 2007 visits to the site have remained fairly stable with between 50-70,000 visits (and 40-50,000 unique visitors) every month. The marked usage peak in April 2009 was caused by a campaign run by The Mirror newspaper, which urged its readers to email their MPs and ask for full citizenship rights for Gurkhas who fought for Britain¹². Every year parliamentary summer recess between July and October results in a noticeable drop in traffic to the site, as does the turn of the year. Spikes are often related to particular campaigns mobilising their supporters to use the site, as will be outlined in section 2.2 Messages Delivered & Amount of Usage.

Compared to other major mySociety sites WriteToThem ranks in terms of traffic a joint third with FixMyStreet (a site to report local problems to the council), receiving only about one fifth of the traffic of mySociety's most popular site TheyWorkForYou that makes available information about the members of various UK parliaments and assemblies. Until 2009 WriteToThem

¹⁰ <http://awstats.sourceforge.net/>

¹¹ <http://piwik.org/>

¹² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/04/28/treat-gurkhas-like-the-heroes-they-are-115875-21314272/>

occupied the second rank but has since lost out due to the growth of WhatDoTheyKnow, a relatively new site where people can view and submit Freedom of Information requests.

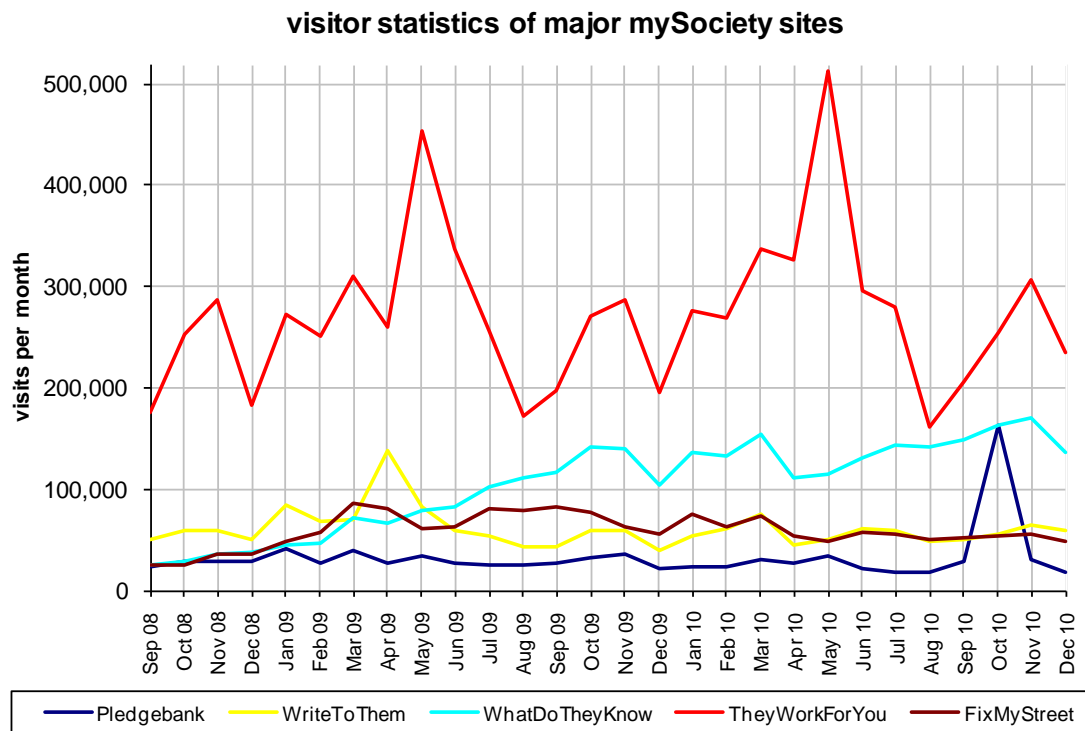


Figure 4: Visitor statistics of major mySociety sites (September 2008 - December 2010)

Source: mySociety Piwik web analytics

Note: Under-reporting for data in April 2010 as no statistics were collected from 26 April 2010 until around midday Friday 30 April 2010 due to update error.

The web analytics show a fairly consistent bounce rate of around 30%: that is, about one in three visitors leaves the site after checking only one single page, indicating that the site was not used to send a message. On average visitors look at about four pages. Taking into account the users who only have a quick look at the site (i.e. look at one page only), this number corresponds well with the number of steps necessary in order to send a message, which requires accessing five pages. In other words it seems that most people who actually decide to give the site a try do go all the way and send a message.

A detailed analysis of user navigation through the site is available for the last months of 2010 thanks to a custom Piwik plugin built by mySociety developer Louise Crow. It reveals that around two-thirds of visitors to the site do at least type in their post code to see a list of their representatives. Of those, more than 50% go on and send a message to a representative.

There are methodological challenges in correctly measuring time spent on the site, but on average, visits last for about 4.5 minutes. However, this number hides considerable variation among users. While about half of all visits are over within half a minute, around 10% of visits last more than 15 minutes, probably because the user is writing a message on the site. Most visits occur on working days, when traffic is about twice as high as on weekends. Usage is heaviest between 10am and 2pm and despite a marked drop around 4 to 5pm remains on a high level later

in the day as the following figure shows for the year 2010. Given that according to the user survey about two thirds of WriteToThem users are currently in employment, these findings may suggest that a considerable share of usage takes place at work.

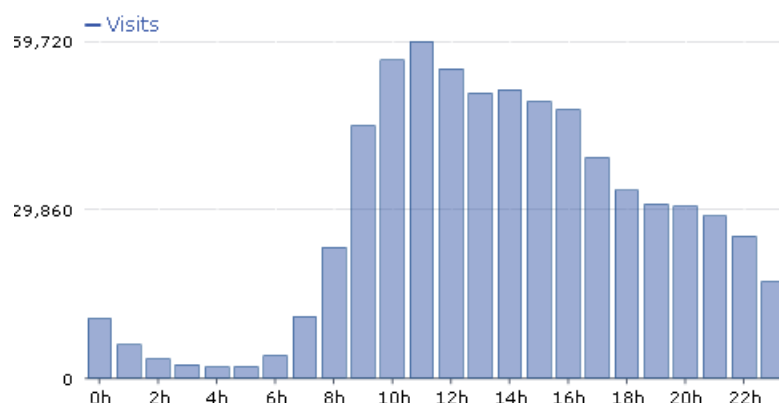


Figure 5: Time of day for visits to WriteToThem (2010)

Source: *mySociety Pivik web analytics*

The web stats give only an indication of actual usage of the site. This can be measured more accurately by analysing the database which records when a message is sent and to whom (though not the content itself). Table 3 shows the number of people that have used the site to contact their representative on an annual basis. As citizens are usually represented by several councillors on the local level as well as by several MEPs on the European level, the site allows sending the same message to all of these representatives at once. In the figure below this is counted as one single use only.

Table 3: Number of people who have used WriteToThem (2005 – 2010)

year	# users who used site once during the year	# users who used site several times during the year	total number of users
2005	23,030 (84%)	4,531 (16%)	27,561 (100%)
2006	52,953 (83%)	10,619 (17%)	63,572 (100%)
2007	78,190 (80%)	19,047 (20%)	97,237 (100%)
2008	81,909 (81%)	19,644 (19%)	101,553 (100%)
2009	105,273 (82%)	23,061 (18%)	128,334 (100%)
2010	86,822 (82%)	19,263 (18%)	106,085 (100%)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: Based on analysis of unique email addresses used to send messages. Unique email addresses is the closest estimate to actual number of people using the site but it is liable to certain inaccuracies as there are people who will use multiple different email addresses while there are others (often groups) who use one email address to send multiple messages.

The figures below visualise the development of usage numbers. After a rather stable period in 2007 and 2008, usage peaked in 2009. In 2010 usage figures returned almost to those seen in

2007 and 2008 despite the General Election 2010 when the site could not be used to email MPs for about three weeks prior to the General Election during which there were formally no MPs.

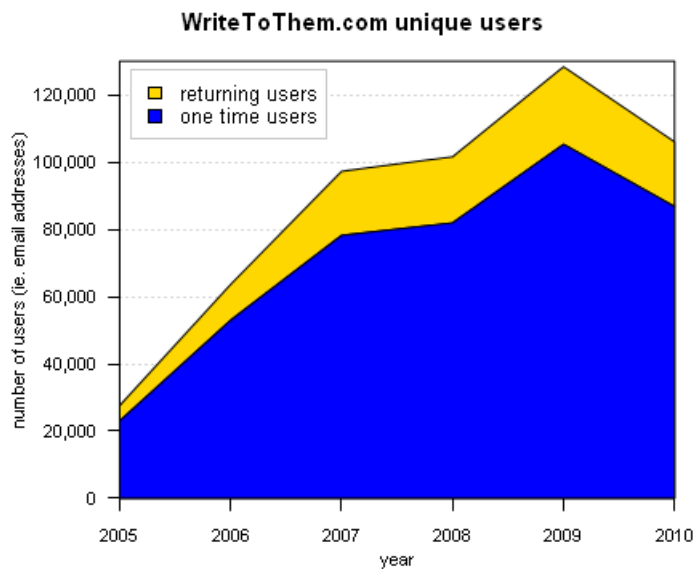


Figure 6: User counts of WriteToThem (2005 - 2010)

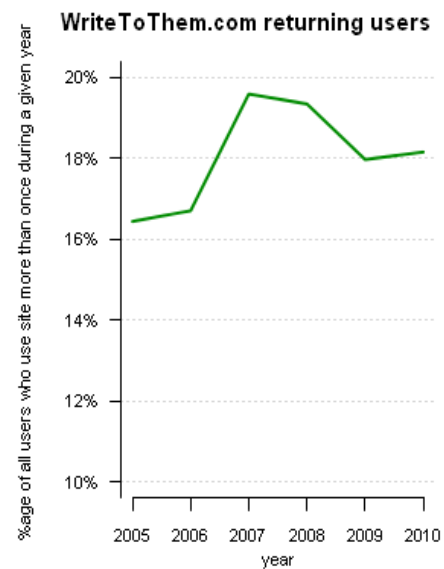


Figure 7: Share of returning users (2005 - 2010)

Source: mySociety – WriteToThem database records

Note: User counts based on unique email addresses. Sending multiple messages at once (e.g. to all your MEPs) was counted as one use.

About one in six users have used the site more than once in a year - that is, they came back to send another message. Figure 7 visualises the share of returning users, which averages at around 18% of all users in any given year. This share of returning users should be testament to the perceived usefulness of the site. However, frequent use of the site might also be related to non-responsiveness of representatives: citizens may be repeatedly sending messages trying to elicit a response.

Figure 8 shows that the majority of returning users will use the site twice within a calendar year (63% in 2010) while about 30% will use it three to five times during a year. A small share of about 1% of the returning users uses the site once a month or more. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of those very frequent users are pressure groups that urge people at meetings to write to their MP, using an organisational email address.

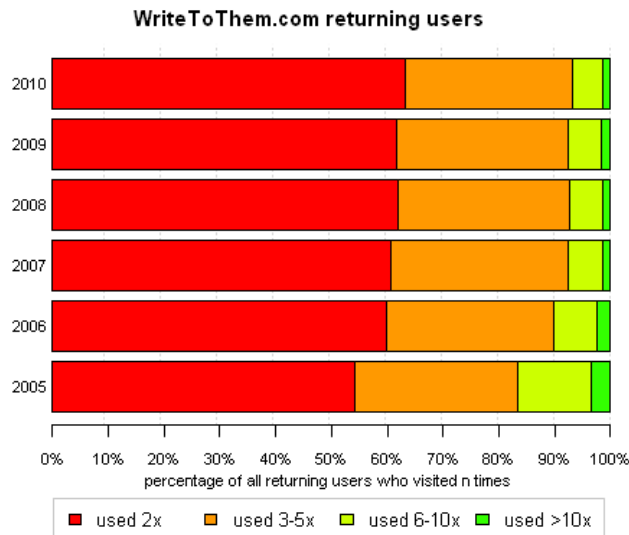


Figure 8: Frequency of usage during a year: Number of times returning users used the site (2005 - 2010)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Another analysis shows that of all the users in 2010 a total of 15% had used the site already on at least one previous day within the last twelve months, and almost 5% of all users had used it on three or more previous days within the last twelve months. This indicates that a significant share of repeat users only use the site on a single day, but they send multiple messages. Looking further back than just the last twelve months around one in six people who used the site in 2010 had used the site before in previous years. Figure 9 shows that usage of WriteToThem is not necessarily a regular activity carried out year after year. More than 40% of these loyal users had used the site in previous years but with a gap of at least one year in between. There is a core group of around 1,100 people who used the site every year in the last four years since 2007 and about 400 of them even used the site every year since 2006.

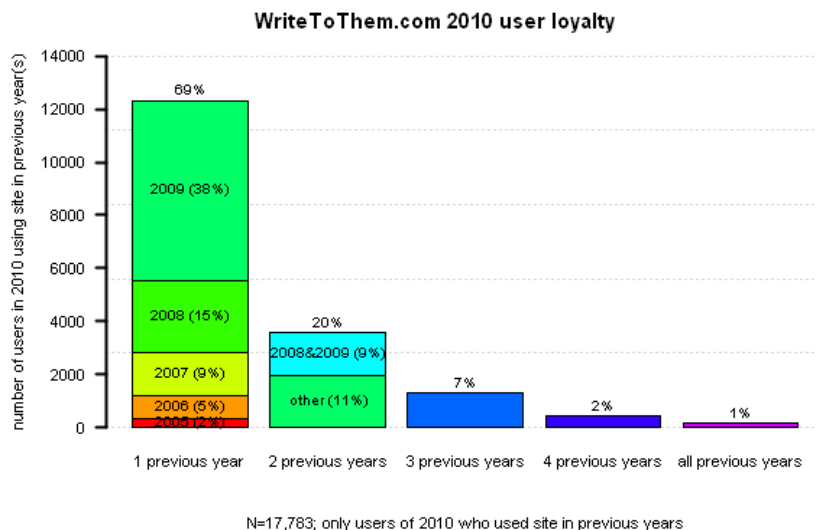


Figure 9: Loyalty of users who used the site not only in 2010 but also in previous years

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: Percentages based on all loyal users in 2010.

People who have used the site more than once during the current year (frequent users) are also more likely to have used the site in previous years too. Overall in 2010 three out of ten frequent users also used the site in previous years. There is little difference between people who used the site sporadically (but at least twice) and those who have used it heavily (more than 5 times in 2010). Consistent heavy users are the exception: only about a third of people who used the site heavily in 2010 (more than 5 times) have also used the site on such a scale in previous years. It seems as if usage is concentrated on certain events in which some people send many messages but otherwise seldom use the site.

2.2 Messages Delivered & Amount of Usage

2.2.1 General Usage Patterns

From December 2000 up to February 2005 FaxYourMP delivered more than 100,000 faxes to representatives. In January 2003 alone about 6,000 faxes were sent, averaging about 200 faxes to MPs every day. Some issues particularly sparked use, for example in one single day in April 2002 more than 600 faxes were sent, probably as a result of the hunting vote. Since the launch of WriteToThem in February 2005 the amount of messages delivered increased substantially, from 42,500 in 2005 to almost 230,000 in 2009 as Table 4 shows. As the web analytics already indicated, 2009 was a year with exceptionally high usage. Otherwise the site seems to have reached a more stable usage level with around 180,000 messages sent in 2007, 2008 and 2010.

Table 4: Number of messages sent via WriteToThem to respective level of government (2005 – 2010)

year	Councillors	MPs	MEPs	Other	total
2005	3,720 (9%)	29,974 (71%)	7,069 (17%)	1,750 (4%)	42,513 (100%)
2006	11,132 (13%)	62,034 (71%)	6,380 (7%)	7,955 (9%)	87,501 (100%)
2007	30,375 (17%)	88,198 (51%)	33,850 (19%)	22,325 (13%)	174,748 (100%)
2008	32,880 (18%)	94,479 (52%)	32,433 (18%)	23,701 (13%)	183,493 (100%)
2009	34,921 (15%)	124,051 (54%)	43,184 (19%)	26,644 (12%)	228,800 (100%)
2010	35,218 (19%)	99,697 (53%)	29,322 (16%)	23,426 (13%)	187,663 (100%)

Source: mySociety – WriteToThem database records

Figure 10 illustrates the development and the distribution of messages delivered to different levels of government, namely local Councillors, national Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament (the three biggest receivers) as well as other representatives (this includes for example Lords, Members of the Scottish Parliament or London Assembly Members). By far the biggest share of messages is to Westminster MPs who receive one in every two messages sent via the site. Messages to local councillors account for about one in every five or six messages in recent years, and the same goes for messages to MEPs.

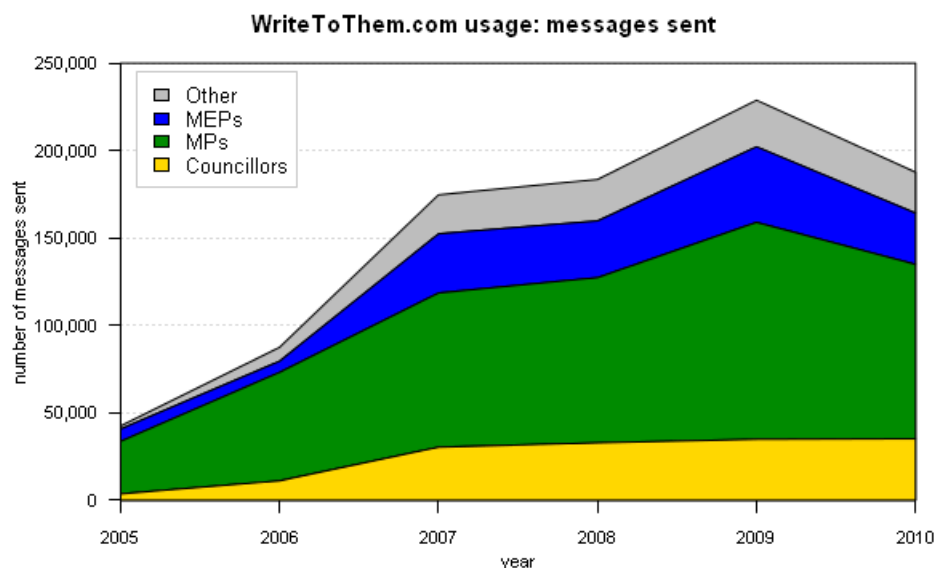


Figure 10: Number of messages sent via WriteToThem (2005 - 2010)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

However, for certain levels of government citizens can send a message to several representatives at once. As citizens are usually represented by several councillors on the local level as well as by several MEPs on the European level, the site allows sending the same message to all of these representatives at once (in all other circumstances filters aim to prevent the use of copy-and-paste messages). For brevity these are referred to as bulk messages within this report and Figure 11 shows that this option is most often used for MEPs which is not surprising given that any one European Parliament constituency is represented by a group of MEPs. On about half of the occasions that the site is used to email a MEP, the message is sent to several of them at once.

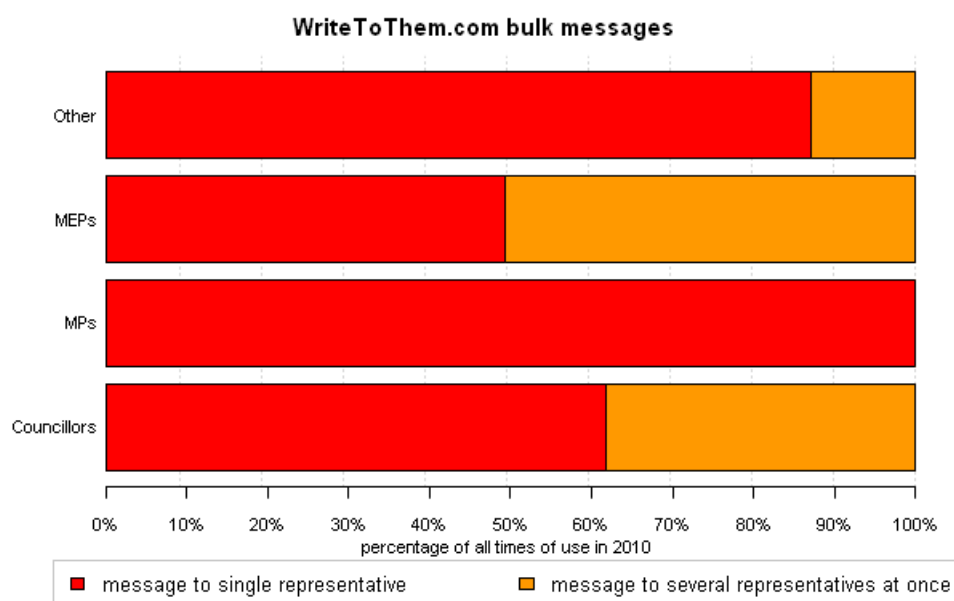


Figure 11: Share of bulk messages by representative type (2010)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Given the option to send bulk messages it is more instructive to measure how often the site was used to send a message to a certain type of representative regardless whether it was a message to a single representative or the same message to the same group of representatives as is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Number of times WriteToThem was used to send a message by level of government (2005 – 2010)

year	Councillors	MPs	MEPs	Other	total
2005	3,720 (9%)	29,974 (71%)	7,068 (17%)	1,750 (4%)	42,512 (100%)
2006	11,130 (13%)	62,034 (71%)	6,375 (7%)	7,953 (9%)	87,492 (100%)
2007	21,438 (16%)	88,198 (65%)	10,937 (8%)	14,953 (11%)	135,526 (100%)
2008	21,596 (15%)	94,479 (67%)	9,904 (7%)	14,608 (10%)	140,587 (100%)
2009	21,142 (12%)	124,051 (71%)	13,185 (8%)	16,263 (9%)	174,641 (100%)
2010	20,736 (15%)	99,697 (70%)	8,731 (6%)	14,136 (10%)	143,300 (100%)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: *Sending multiple messages at once (e.g. to all your MEPs) was counted as one use.*

In 2009, the most popular year to date, WriteToThem was used 175,000 times to send almost 230,000 messages by a total of around 130,000 people. While this was the busiest year to date, in 2007, 2008 and 2010 the site was used around 140,000 times. The visualisation of these numbers in the two figures below illustrates just how often Westminster MPs are contacted with the help of the site. On two out of three times when the site is used it is to contact this type of representative. This pattern differs from data in the ongoing Hansard Society's "*Audit of Political Engagement*" survey which has consistently shown that contacting local councillors is usually more popular than contacting MPs¹³ (Hansard Society, 2010: 118:118). This has changed slightly with increased contacting of MPs in relation to the MP expense scandal in 2009, but even then the share of people contacting a local councillor equals those contacting national MPs. While there might be a lack of awareness amongst the public that WriteToThem can be used to contact local representatives as well as MPs it seems plausible that the interaction at the local level is more likely to happen offline, either because offline channels such as surgeries are more convenient for getting in touch or because those in need have no access to the Internet.

Contacting representatives other than MPs has remained on a fairly stable level since 2007 while use for contacting MPs has steadily increased until 2009. The decline in 2010 can be attributed both to the unusually high levels of contacting in 2009 as well as to the General Election in 2010 when for about three weeks there were no MPs to contact.

¹³ The survey of the British public showed that of those who had presented their views to a politician 48% had contacted their Councillor, 29% an MP and 22% both.

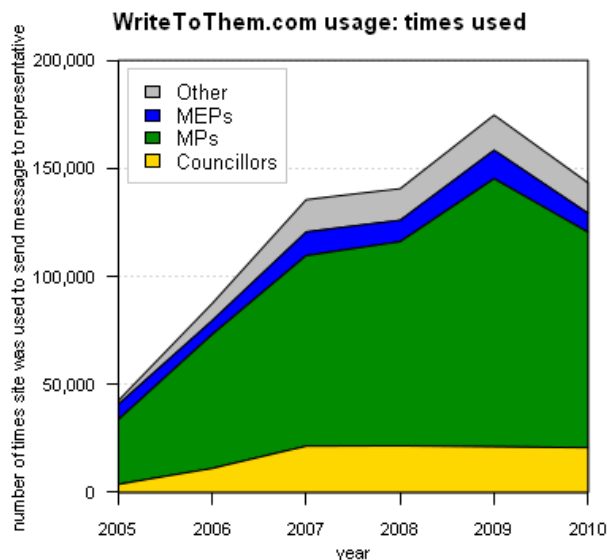


Figure 12: Number of times WriteToThem was used to send a message by level of government (2005 - 2010)

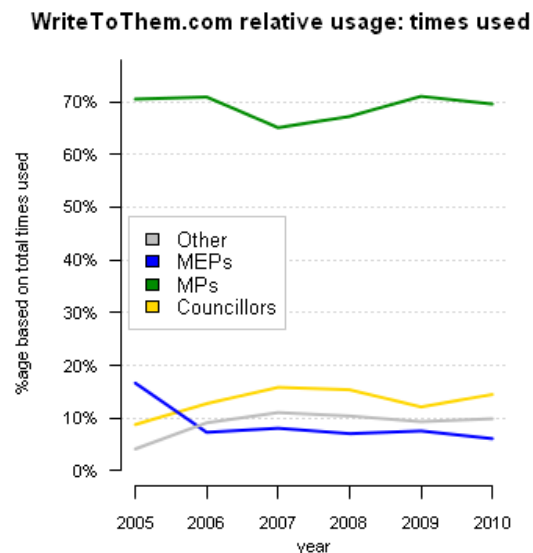


Figure 13: Relative use of site to send messages by respective representative (2005 - 2010)

Source: mySociety – WriteToThem database records

In 2009, the year with the heaviest usage of WriteToThem to date, a total of 124,051 messages was sent to MPs which translates into an average of about 190 messages per MP per year or less than four messages per calendar week. However, the variations are huge. The most recent data that is available on individual MPs is from 2008¹⁴ and it shows that MPs in the bottom quintile receive on average only about *1 message per week* (60/year) while their colleagues in the top quintile received on average about *5 messages per week* (260/year). To put these numbers into context, in summer 2008 we conducted an informal survey of MPs on the amount of communication they receive (see section 4.1 Communication Demands on Representatives). While the data is by no means representative the figures clearly indicate that messages from WriteToThem account only for a very small share of MPs' overall email communication. For the site itself this signifies considerable growth opportunities, and also means that it does not put a burden on representatives in the House of Commons and their staff. While this comparative data is only available for the Westminster parliament it seems unlikely that the figures will be much higher for other types of representatives.

2.2.2 Particular Usage Patterns

The yearly numbers hide considerable variation throughout the years as the two figures below illustrate for 2010. Most notable is the drop in usage for messages to MPs in April 2010 due to this feature being disabled in the run-up to the General Election. The drop in August and September is accounted for by the parliamentary summer recess. There is also varying usage for MEPs (for example April 2010). In comparison, usage of the site to write to councillors remains fairly stable in numbers throughout the year.

¹⁴ <http://www.writetothem.com/stats/2008/mps?o=s>

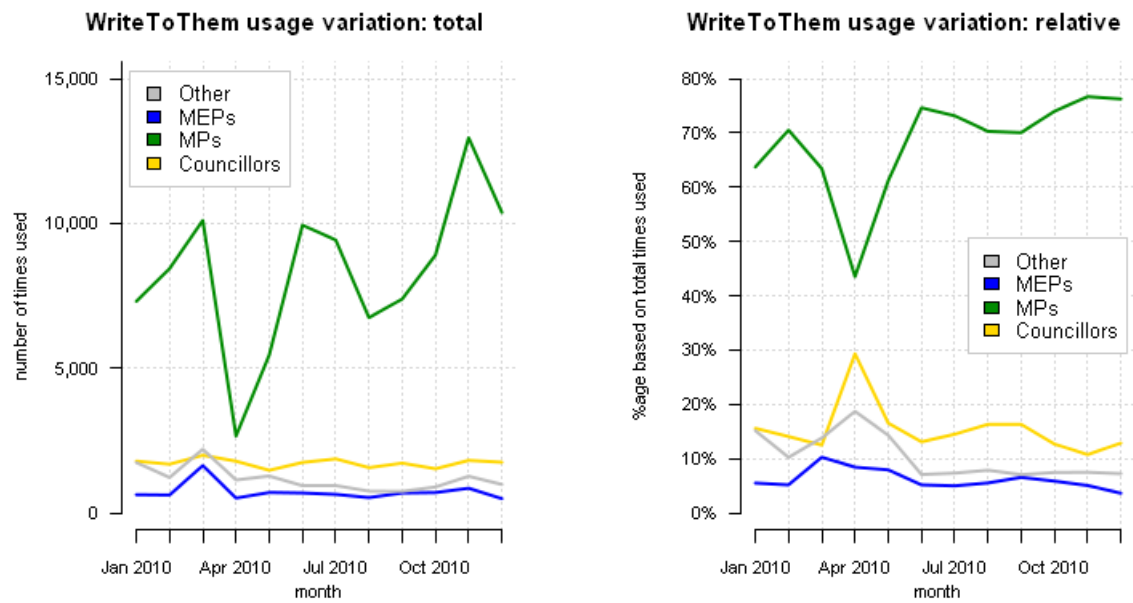
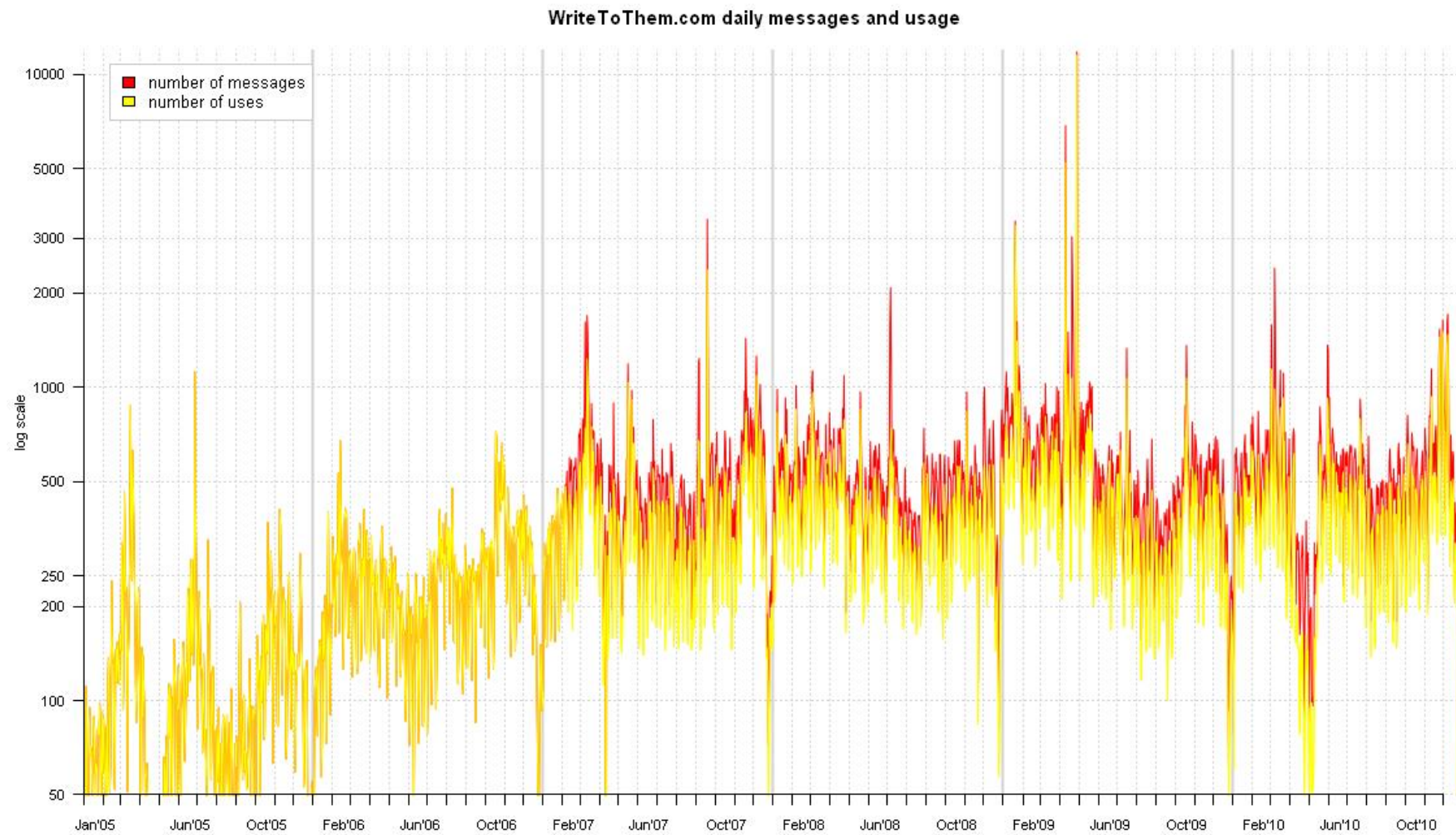


Figure 14: Variation in usage of WriteToThem throughout the year (2010)

Source: *mySociety* – *WriteToThem* database records

The daily usage figures reported in Figure 15 (below) highlight even larger variations.

Figure 15: Number of times WriteToThem was used and number of messages sent by day (2005 – 2010)



Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: *Based on date message was written; counts are on logarithmic scale, tick marks represent first of month.*

Spikes in usage are usually caused by campaigns and/or contentious political issues that are being debated at the time. WriteToThem applies spam filters to prevent mass mailing of copy-and-paste letters, but many users do take the time to draft an individual letter, hence the spike in traffic through these campaigns. Table 6 and Table 7 below show the busiest months (respective days) and the likely reason for the high usage.

The record for the busiest month to date is held by April 2009 when two campaigns coincided: one by a newspaper in a bid to get full citizenship rights for Gurkhas who served in the British military, and one that aimed to lobby MPs against a rise in fuel tax. As was shown above, 2009 was a record year in WriteToThem's history, and campaigns no doubt contributed to this, not least in January 2009 when mySociety itself urged users to write to MPs opposing a move aimed at concealing their expenses. For some reason March seems to be popular for campaigns with every March of the last four years making it into the top ten.

Table 6: Ten busiest months on WriteToThem according to number of uses (2005 – 2010)

rank	month	number of uses (messages sent)	description
1	Apr 2009	34,303 (46,245)	Two large campaigns, one lobbying for full citizenship rights for Gurkhas and one against a rise in fuel tax.
2	Jan 2009	24,427 (30,410)	Campaign against MPs voting to conceal their expenses ¹⁵ .
3	Nov 2010	17,004 (21,366)	Campaign called Lighterlater.org aiming to shift the clocks forward by one hour throughout the entire year to have more daylight during the day.
4	Mar 2007	16,612 (22,537)	"Our World, Our Say" on Trident Replacement ¹⁶ .
5	Mar 2009	16,311 (21,531)	In part, a campaign by "Compassion in world farming" to end factory farming.
6	Mar 2010	15,943 (23,037)	In part, a campaign by "Open Rights Group" to prevent web blocking clauses in the Digital Economy Bill.
7	Mar 2008	15,070 (18,594)	Probably "I want a referendum" about the EU Constitution ¹⁷ .
8	May 2009	15,031 (20,986)	Unusually high number of referrals from TheyWorkForYou.com, probably in relation to MP expenses; also campaigns by "HSMP Forum" on the UK immigration system, a campaign by "Amnesty International" for an inquiry into use of torture by the UK government ¹⁸ .
9	Nov 2007	14,232 (19,409)	<i>probably unsubscribe-me (an Amnesty International campaign)</i> ¹⁹

¹⁵ <http://www.mysociety.org/2009/01/17/6-days-to-stop-mps-concealing-their-expenses/>

¹⁶ http://www.ourworldoursay.org/trident_replacement_action.php

¹⁷ <http://www.iwantareferendum.com/involved.aspx#MP>

¹⁸ http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=598

¹⁹ <http://www.unsubscribe-me.org/>

10	Dec 2010	13,453 (16,554)	Several smaller campaigns including Lighterlater.org, one by the Football Supporters' Federation to allow safe standing sections in football grounds and one by Radio Caroline to secure a medium wave license for broadcasting.
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Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: *Based on data from 1 January 2005 until 31 December 2010.*

Table 7 records the ten busiest days on WriteToThem. This is largely dominated by the afore-mentioned campaigns on Gurkhas, fuel tax, MP expenses and changing clocks for more daylight. All of those comprise mostly messages to Westminster MPs.

Table 7: Ten busiest days on WriteToThem according to number of uses (2005 – 2010)

rank	day	number of times used (messages sent)	description
1	28 April 2009	11,503 (11,798)	Campaign by “The Mirror” to get full citizenship rights for Gurkhas who fought for Britain ²⁰ .
2	10 April 2009	5,217 (6,859)	Campaign by “PetrolPrices.com” to lobby MPs against a further rise in fuel tax ²¹ .
3	20 January 2009	3,286 (3,403)	Campaign against MPs voting to conceal their expenses.
4	19 September 2007	2,378 (3,445)	EasyJet campaign (see Anecdota).
5	19 January 2009	2,169 (2,291)	Campaign against MPs voting to conceal their expenses.
6	29 April 2009	2,083 (2,373)	Gurkha campaign (see above).
7	21 January 2009	1,946 (2,047)	Campaign against MPs voting to conceal their expenses.
8	30 November 2010	1,509 (1,641)	LighterLater campaign for shifting clocks an hour forward.
9	8 December 2010	1,478 (1,713)	Campaign by Football Supporters’ Federation to allow safe standing sections in football grounds.
10	25 November 2010	1,447 (1,536)	LighterLater campaign (see above).

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: *Based on data from 1 January 2005 until 31 December 2010.*

There have also been times with very low usage. For example a marked drop is recorded for the periods before the General Elections in 2005 and 2010. The WriteToThem facility to contact MPs is disabled in

²⁰ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/04/28/treat-gurkhas-like-the-heroes-they-are-115875-21314272/>

²¹ <http://www.petrolprices.com/itsyourduty/>

the pre-election period as there are - by electoral law - no MPs. Also the end of the year with the Christmas and New Year break is a time when few people write to their elected representatives.

2.2.3 Assessing the Market Share of WriteToThem

While the number of people using WriteToThem is certainly large it constitutes only a small share of British citizens who want to get in touch with their representatives via the Internet. First of all, compared to all messages representatives receive from constituents, very few seem to come in via WriteToThem (see section 4.1 Communication Demands on Representatives). Data from the Oxford Internet Survey 2009 (Dutton et al., 2009) indicates that about 6% of the British population (aged 14 years and above) have used the Internet to contact “a politician, government or local government official” within the last twelve months. This translates into roughly 3m British people (based on a population of 50.3m British citizens aged 14 years and older, see Office for National Statistics, 2010) and the 106,000 people who have used WriteToThem in 2010 account for less than 4% of this overall audience. However, this number can be considered a lower bound given that a significant share of these 3m people will have contacted non-elected officials that WriteToThem does not cover.

2.3 Site Referrers

Search engines act as important referrers to the site. About half of all respondents to the extended user survey indicated that they found out about the site via a search engine (see Figure 16). About one in four users heard about the site from other campaign websites, underlining the importance of WriteToThem for organised campaigns as already highlighted by the analysis of traffic to the site (2.2 Messages Delivered). The sizable share of people who hear about WriteToThem via personal recommendation (13%) can be interpreted as a sign of its perceived usefulness. Few people find out about the site from the media, indicating that news coverage so far is not sufficient to alert potentially interested citizens to the site.

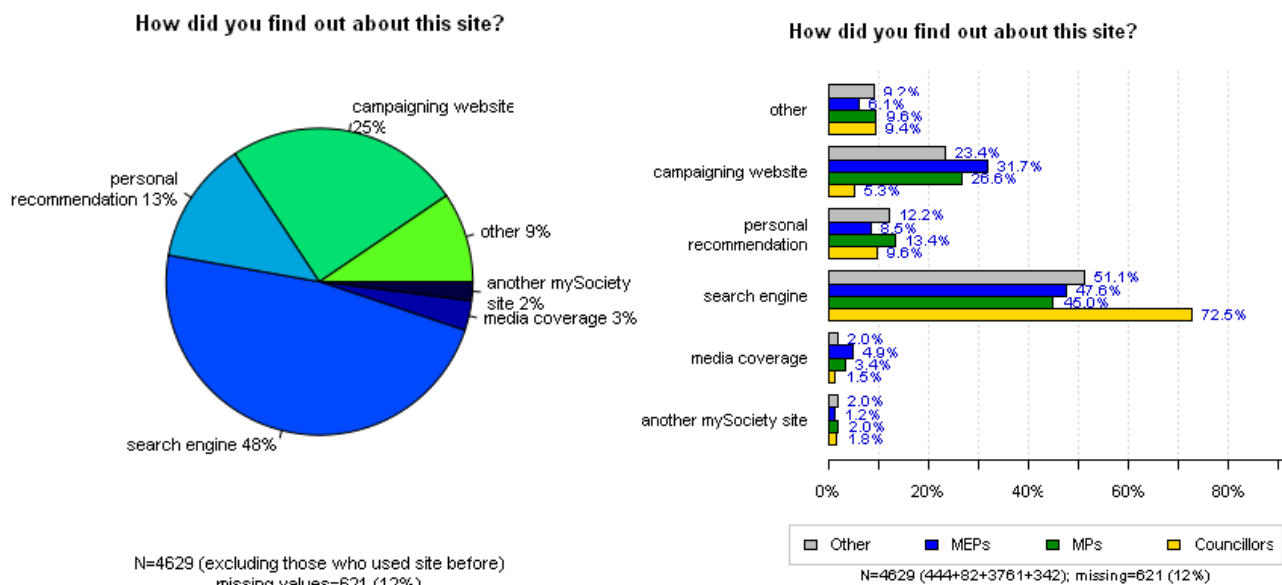


Figure 16: How users of WriteToThem find out about the site

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

There are some marked differences between people writing to their councillors and people writing to representatives such as MPs or MEPs. Those contacting local representatives are significantly more likely to come to WriteToThem via a search engine, indicating that they do not know the site, an assumption that is also supported by the high share of first time writers in the group of people contacting councillors (see section 3.1 Political Profile of WriteToThem Users). If citizens write to their MPs or MEPs they are more likely to have had a personal recommendation of the site or found out about it from a campaigning website which indicates a higher tendency towards being politically involved already, in correspondence with other findings in this report.

While the responses to the user survey give a picture about how people get to know the site, the web stats collected from the server show where visits to the site are coming from on an everyday basis. In recent years the most important driver of traffic to the site were links from other websites which account for more than 40% of all visits as Figure 17 shows.

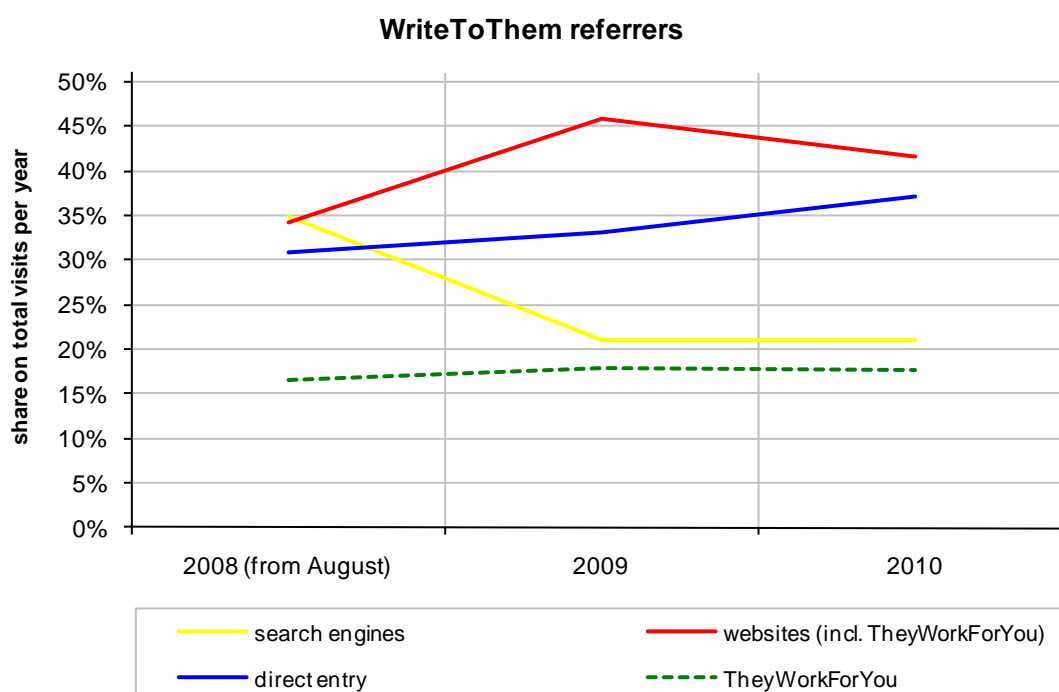


Figure 17: Where visits to WriteToThem are coming from (August 2008 – December 2010)

Source: *mySociety Pivik web analytics*

Most often users come from TheyWorkForYou.com, another mySociety website with information about individual representatives. About 20% of visits to WriteToThem originate from this site. Only the search engine Google sends more visits to the site, and only by a small margin.

Notably in the last three years Facebook has always been among the top three referring websites to WriteToThem, as Table 8 (below) highlights.

Table 8: Top 3 referring websites to WriteToThem (2008 - 2010)

rank	2008 (from August)	2009	2010
1	theyworkforyou.com (41,499)	theyworkforyou.com (143,756)	theyworkforyou.com (121,280)
2	publicwhip.org.uk (807)	www.petrolprices.com ²² (49,265)	lighterlater.org/ ²³ (8,693)
3	facebook.com (799)	facebook.com (5,534)	facebook.com (6,969)
total traffic from websites	85,729	367,228	284,432

Source: mySociety Pivik web analytics

Note: Numbers in brackets denote visits from this site to writetothem.com; Referrals from webmail programs are excluded.

About a third of the visits are by users who are directly accessing the site. This rate has been constantly increasing, indicating a growing familiarity with the site. While search engines seem to play an important role in making people aware of the site as the user survey highlights, only one in five visits will actually come from a search engine – once they know of the site, people seem to access it by directly typing in the URL. Visits can also originate from links in emails that people receive, urging them to join some campaign on the site. Despite the rather apt name that might aid accessing the site by directly entering the address, in 2010 one in ten visits from a search engine is from users searching for “*write to them*”, making it the most popular search term. Such searches have been increasing in recent years, also indicating a growing popularity of the site if not the URL itself.

2.3.1 Advertising & Marketing

In general mySociety does not heavily market its sites, mainly due to financial constraints. The only real form of advertising happens in the form of Google Adwords sponsored via a Google grant. In 2010 an ad was displayed for about 1.2m searches for words such as “*local councillor*” or “*MEP*” which resulted in more than 60,000 clicks. While this does not directly translate into actual visits to the site, comparable data available from the mySociety website TheyWorkForYou suggests that these 60,000 clicks could have resulted in almost 20,000 visits and hence could account for about 15% of overall search engine traffic in 2010.

The most successful marketing takes place on mySociety’s TheyWorkForYou. In 2010 the links to WriteToThem on the pages with information about individual representatives resulted in 120,000 visits to the site. Otherwise, marketing of the site happens through its inclusion in campaigns, for example from media organizations. The Mirror, The Times and the BBC have all used WriteToThem to mobilise users to

²² A campaigning site against a rise in fuel tax.

²³ A campaigning site to promote putting the clock an hour forward.

contact MPs, for example with a dedicated widget on their own website (for more information see section 5 Anecdotal). Also the (currently not updated) responsiveness statistics which show for each MP how many messages they have answered are popular with journalists.

2.4 Responsiveness of Representatives

From early on the site published performance tables²⁴ based on surveying its users about whether or not they received a reply from the representative contacted. These have at times caused some controversy (see 5 Anecdotal). Based on the answers from the simple survey which notably include only those users who have sent single messages to representatives, Table 9 and Figure 18 show the development of the responsiveness of representatives. While overall almost 60% of messages sent via WriteToThem get a reply, there is considerable difference between the types of representatives addressed. While MPs answer about 60% of messages they receive, users sending a message to an MEP have less than a 50% chance of receiving a reply. Half of all messages sent to a councillor gets a reply, a rate that has remained fairly stable throughout the years. In contrast, both for MPs as well as MEPs a decline is recorded for 2010. This could signal the start of a new trend or it might simply be attributable to a time of fewer responses as new MPs settled into Westminster.

Table 9: Responsiveness of different levels of government to messages sent via WriteToThem (2005 - 2010)

year	Councillors	MPs	MEPs	Other	total
2005	49%	63%	53%	42%	60%
2006	51%	61%	45%	31%	56%
2007	52%	60%	48%	36%	56%
2008	53%	60%	46%	42%	58%
2009	52%	61%	43%	37%	58%
2010	53%	56%	38%	40%	54%

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database records*

Note: Based on people that sent one message at a time (i.e. no bulk messages) and that answered the questionnaire of the simple survey. Response rate around 70% (see C.2 Survey Response Rates). Data for 2010 includes messages sent until end of December to which responses to questionnaire were received until end of February 2011.

²⁴ For early stats pages of the now defunct FaxYourMP.com see the Internet Archive: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.faxyourmp.com/stats.php3; for more recent stats see <http://www.writetothem.com/stats>

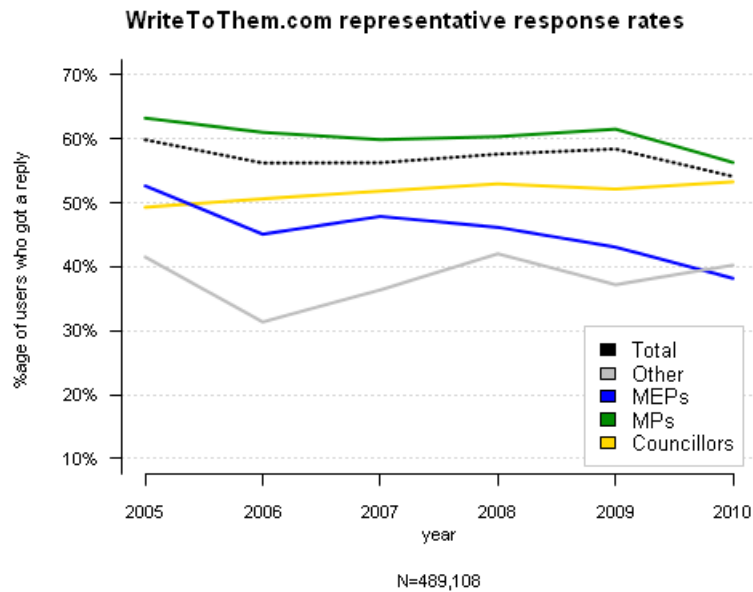


Figure 18: Percentage of messages that received a reply by level of government (2005 - 2010)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem simple survey 2005-2010*

Note: *This survey of WriteToThem users has a response rate of about 70%.*

The overall averages hide considerable changes in individual representatives' responsiveness to messages from WriteToThem, as the following diagram shows using MP data for 2005 to 2007 (unfortunately more recent data is not available).

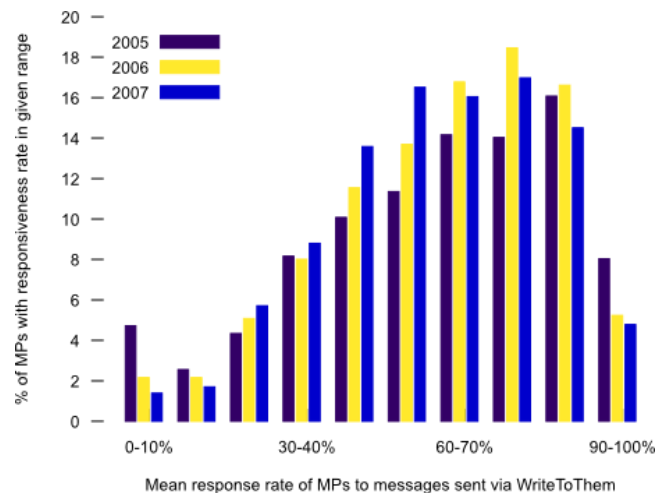


Figure 19: Response rates of MPs (2005 - 2007)²⁵

Source: *mySociety WriteToThem Zeitgeist statistics²⁶*

What can be seen from the extended user survey is that replying to constituents' messages can have a real benefit for representatives while ignoring them can come at a real cost, as these two quotes from WriteToThem users highlight:

²⁵ source: Francis Irving (<http://www.writetothem.com/stats/2007/zeitgeist>)

²⁶ <http://www.writetothem.com/stats/2007/zeitgeist>

“Mr [name of representative] went above and beyond what I expected to get, I thought I would just be totally ignored, this experience has made me decide to definitely vote in the next elections”

“What's the point when your councillor doesn't reply? He's not getting my vote in the next election, nor from any of my nuclear and extended families and I'll tell everyone at work about my lack of a reply as well. 23 of them live in his constituency.”

About half of the users who got a response from their representative have indicated that they want to reply so usage of WriteToThem is not just a one off but has the potential to create a dialogue. Again, there are differences depending on which level of representative was addressed: 72% plan to reply to a message from their councillor, which is significantly more than MPs (to which 45% plan a reply) or MEPs (to which only around a third of users plan to reply).

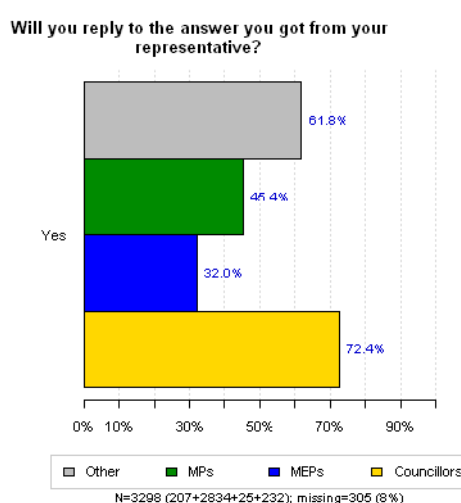


Figure 20: Willingness to respond in relation to type of representative addressed

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

2.4.1 User Satisfaction with representative replies

We asked all those who did get a reply whether or not they were satisfied with it. The result is very encouraging as four out of five users indicated they were happy with the response they got. There seems little variation in satisfaction regarding councillors, MPs or MEPs. People who were satisfied most often cited quick replies.

“It was fast and he did all he could to help”

“The reply was prompt and addressed my letter content”

“Prompt, polite and efficient”

Quite often these users got what they felt was a personal response, either a written letter, a telephone call or even a personal visit.

“They contacted me within a few days and arranged a meeting.”

“Immediate and very helpful response followed up by phone calls and visits.”

“He responded in person - in a letter not an email - and also contacted other MPs who have subsequently been in touch”

“both my representatives personally visited my house to discuss my problem.”

It has become plain that many citizens were actually not expecting to receive any reply from their representative, let alone help, so there was room for positive surprises:

“I was shocked that I received a letter from my MSP within two days of emailing them through your site.”

“the response was very very fast. also it rather shocked me as the housing officer[...] ,was on the report the same day. very impressed.”

“some one from his team called me and arranged an appointment within 2 days... I was very impressed with that response.”

“My representative was amazing and extremely helpful”

“much more information than I expected and respectful too.”

“once i got this letter i felt like someone did care about my issue.”

“I couldn't've had a better response from any one, and she really cared, and was on my side. thanks.”

Most of all it has become clear that the contact citizens can establish through WriteToThem has the potential to make a real, tangible difference to citizens:

“since contacting our M.P everything we asked for has started falling into place”

“my mp hassled the tax credits office for me several times and I got my payments.”

“yes 100%. replied immediately. understood my problem.issues resolved in under 10 days after 4months me trying to resolve it personally. thank you”

“Councillor rang me and sorted the problem out with the Local Authority whereas I had been ignored for 5 weeks”

“Mr [name of representative] went above and beyond what I expected to get, I thought I would just be totally ignored, this experience has made me decide to definitely vote in the next elections”

However, one in five users was not happy with the answer received, mostly because they felt they received only a standard answer:

“Provided a standard response without referring to the points I raised.”

“Toed the party line”

“Largely a stock answer.”

“I felt that it was a boilerplate, standard response.”

“It was a generic response to the issue. My sister who also wrote a letter to the same MP got an identical reply”

Others complained about not being taken seriously:

“The answer was a one-line dismissal. He didn't even get my name right.”

“I didn't like the tone. I thought it was somewhat dismissive”

“Standard typ responses as a general rule- MP's letters have been patronising in tone.”

“I didn't want to hear what is obviously the truth! Doh!”

Also many found the question was not really answered:

“didn't directly address the issue raised”

“His initial response suggested he did not read the email fully - then when I wrote again his second response was I will write to you - as yet to date no response”

“did not resolve what i needed to know”

“they just referred me to local county council, no real help”

“because they dont help people for sure”

Many also were dissatisfied because their representative did not agree with them:

“Ultimately he still voted for a bill I wished him to vote against”.

“We have opposing views on civil liberties.”

“No missed the point I was making and was politically of another opinion.[...]”

“because he does not agree with my opinion and will vote against it in any poll”

However, citizens can still appreciate a response even if it is not what they want to hear:

“I received a letter which did not adhere to my personal beliefs, but was a reasoned and polite explanation of my queries.”

“I didn't agree with his comments, but understood his point of view.”

“While not necessarily in agreement with the response, it does open up a communications channel.”

“we totally disagree on the issue, but at least he explained his reasoning (which was the party line, of course)”

2.5 User Satisfaction with Site

Overall the survey showed a great satisfaction with the site: 84% of users would recommend the site to a friend or a colleague provided there would be interest in such a service and half of those are extremely likely to do so.

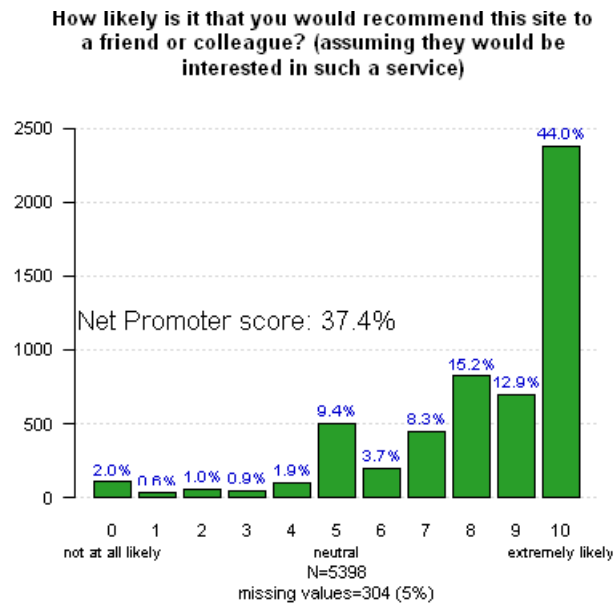


Figure 21: Likelihood of users to recommend WriteToThem (Net Promoter score)

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

By asking users about the likelihood of recommendation of a service the Net Promoter score aims to be a simple measure of both customer satisfaction and user loyalty. It calculates the difference between the group of promoters of a site (those indicating a likelihood of recommendation of 9 or 10) and the group of detractors (scoring 0 - 6) – users indicating 7 or 8 are considered to be passive and are not taken into account (for more details see Reichheld, 2003). According to this calculation, 57% of WriteToThem users are Promoters while 20% are Detractors, giving a Net Promoter Score of 37%. This might be called a conservative estimate of satisfaction because it does not count many that are “likely to” recommend the site but not “extremely likely to” (i.e. those scoring 6, 7 or 8). There were few differences among users who contact different types of representatives.

2.5.1 Reasons for User Satisfaction

Users appreciate a variety of features of WriteToThem. First of all, many highlight the ease of use:

“It’s easy and simple to use, it is a good way of getting in touch with one’s MP, which I often think about doing, and too often don’t do - this made that process a lot easier.”

“I have already recommended this site on several occasions, as I think it is a quick and easy way to contact my MP.”

“The site makes it easy to write to your MP without the hassle of pen and paper. It’s a 21st century way of having dialogue!”

"I didn't have a clue how to contact these people so I was delighted to find your site"

Another valued feature of the site is that it allows users to find out how to contact their representatives in the first place:

"It is so easy to use. Saves having to look up an address."

"You make it easy to find the e-mail address - an MP's website doesn't always do that."

"it's an invaluable resource - especially when you can't remember who your elected representative is!"

"It was the only access I could find to contact my local representative"

The follow-up email, enquiring about whether a user received a reply and the subsequent public statistics about politicians' responsiveness also adds to the value of the site:

"Efficient use of time, and the knowledge that the MP is being monitored."

"Councillors are obviously aware that you are "watching" them as she did reply after prompting from us"

"Because you actually follow up whether the representative responds and hopefully expose that they don't give a damn !!!"

Also some users explained why they prefer email messages over other ways of approaching their politicians:

"It is much easier and quicker than sending a letter or even trying to find an address to send one too!"

"people don't go to a surgery. Email is the only way I'd get to converse with an MP."

"Using this service saves a lot of time, a lot better than going to a surgery. "

"easy way to contact local mps and get a response which is usually rather difficult to gain over the phone etc"

2.5.2 Reasons for User Dissatisfaction

Despite a majority of satisfied users around 16% of current WriteToThem users say that they would not recommend the site. However, what the user survey suggests is that this is less a problem associated with the site itself than with the responsiveness of elected representatives. There is a small but significant correlation (0.21) between whether users received a reply and their rating of the site, which means nothing else than that users blame the site for the unresponsiveness of their representatives. This becomes even more obvious when the Net Promoter scores of those who received a satisfactory reply and those who did not are compared. If users received a reply that satisfied their question they were overwhelmingly positive, much less so if they perceived the reply as unsatisfactory or if they did not receive an answer at all.

Table 10: Net Promoter scores in relation to whether a reply was received

Did user receive a reply from contacted representative?		
YES		NO
49%		17%
Was user satisfied with reply?		
YES	NO	
53%	35%	

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

This is particularly pronounced for the local level:

Table 11: Net Promoter scores in relation to whether a reply was received (Councillors only)

Did user receive a reply from contacted representative?		
YES		NO
55%		-8%
Was user satisfied with reply?		
YES	NO	
60%	36%	

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

So the success of the site depends largely on external factors, a fact which is also supported by the comments.

“If you feel so desperate with government services that you seek help from an MP and they in turn show signs of why you are desperate: IE they never reply... you are only driven into even more despair...what is that to recommend!!!!”

“What's the point when your councillor doesn't reply? He's not getting my vote in the next election, nor from any of my nuclear and extended families and I'll tell everyone at work about my lack of a reply as well. 23 of them live in his constituency.”

“Neither MP or councillor replied to my messages”

“This is the first time i have contacted my MP and I am disappointed he has not yet replied”

Even if users do receive a response they might rate the site badly if they do not like the answer received (for reasons for this dissatisfaction with representative replies, see section 2.4 “Responsiveness of Representatives”). Obviously a site that aims to put citizens in touch with their representatives must be judged by whether it actually succeeds in doing so. Otherwise citizens will turn away from the site:

“I would recommend emailing or calling the MP's office directly. I ended up calling when I did not get a reply to my email sent through this site.”

While it has been shown above that most of these users will be left with a negative impression of WriteToThem, there is a significant group of people who are able to distinguish between the site and the representative. This is indicated by the fact that despite a good third of users not receiving a reply, only 16% are actually dissatisfied (i.e. are not likely or neutral to recommend it):

“This has not worked for me at all, although I realise that you cannot be held responsible for the ignorance of the councillor, I shall be calling to speak to him in his shop”

Some comments also indicate that low readiness to recommend the site to others might be due to a general lack of political interest in people's social networks:

“no-one I know has any faith in democracy or interest in politics”

“i don't think they are interested”

“I doubt if it would ever come up in day to day conversation”

Nevertheless there are not only external factors to blame for users who leave the site rather unhappy.

“The functionality's there, but making it look nicer would make it easier to recommend”

“It would be nice to have some formatting available within the message editor on this site, as this would make the letters more readable when there are a number of quotes contained within them from other sources (amongst other things).”

3 Site Users

In order to obtain basic anonymous information on the political involvement and demography of WriteToThem users two online surveys have been conducted (for more details and the questionnaire refer to C.1 Surveys). The data for the analysis below is mainly derived from an extended survey and includes responses from 5,702 users collected from 15 May 2009 until 28 February 2010 (minimum response rate 40%). As far as it is possible to determine, apart from a possible slight overrepresentation of frequent users of the site the sample seems representative of the sample frame, i.e. those users who were invited to participate. However, a potential bias arises from the sampling strategy, which would only send an invitation to those users that used the site to send single messages to representatives, not a bulk message to several representatives of the same level of government at once. In effect, those users of the site who only used it to send a bulk message are missing from our sample, which accounts for roughly 6% of users during the survey time frame. It is not clear how much their characteristics might differ from other users of the site. For a detailed discussion of the sample bias see section C.3 Sample Bias / Representativeness.

One of mySociety's key aims is to build sites that are useful to and used by citizens from all walks of life without exception. Therefore, this research will analyse how inclusive the audience of WriteToThem is by comparing it with the British population. However, obviously the site cannot reach those who lack Internet access. For that reason, the data collected on the demographics of WriteToThem users will be compared to the demographics of British Internet users, in other words this *comparison will focus on how well British Internet users are represented on WriteToThem*.

At the same time, it is important to note that political participation in democracies has never been inclusive. Instead, it has always been biased towards resource-rich citizens, that is those with better education, higher income and larger social networks as section 4.2 "Political Engagement in Britain" will outline. A simple comparison of the audience of WriteToThem with British Internet users in general fails to take these circumstances into account and is destined to simply show that WriteToThem users are not representative of the Internet population. Instead, a fair comparison would be to focus only on those people who have got in touch with political representatives or government officials in the past, in other words, people who have engaged in the form of political participation for which WriteToThem is relevant. Therefore, another comparison will focus on *the profile of people who have contacted politicians online or offline*. This group is very much biased towards resource-rich parts of the population as will be discussed below. Their demographics will be compared with those of users of WriteToThem in order to assess the potential of WriteToThem to change these persistent patterns of participation.

The data for these comparisons is provided by the Oxford Internet Survey 2009 (Dutton et al., 2009)²⁷. Based on a random sample of more than 2,000 people it aims to give a representative picture of all people

²⁷ See website of OxIS: <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/>

in Britain aged 14 years and older²⁸. For a comprehensive comparative overview refer to the Table 18 in section D Detailed Survey Results and Comparative Data.

A very worthwhile study on data from 2006 has been carried out by mySociety volunteer Sam Smith (2007). Combining the postcode of WriteToThem writers with statistics on deprivation Sam was able to show that people using the site were not more likely to come from better-off areas in England. If anything, citizens from more deprived wards used WriteToThem more often. Despite these encouraging findings the results of the user survey detailed below indicate a rather heavy bias towards resource-rich citizens and there are a number of potential reasons for this difference in observation: even if the deprivation score might be a good description of the actual situation in the area (and there is some debate about this), it is only a summary value for all the people living in the area and there is no reason to believe that the person from this postcode who is using WriteToThem is actually as deprived as the average score indicates. Other, less likely, explanations could be that there might be differences in users of the site between 2006 and 2009/10 or that the users from England differ from users in the rest of the country. Nevertheless it seems appropriate to repeat the postcode analysis for recent data and if it is only in order to assess the validity of deprivation scores.

3.1 Political Profile of WriteToThem Users

This section mainly addresses the question of whether or not WriteToThem can actually activate people to participate politically – for example, if the site is used for contacting of representatives by citizens who would otherwise not do it, or who belong to a group that is traditionally less likely to engage in political participation.

Writing for the First Time

In order to establish how many users of the site have already had experience in contacting representatives, in a simple survey of users the question was asked: *“Is this the first time you’ve ever contacted one of your political representatives, by any means?”*. Table 12 and Figure 22 show the percentage of WriteToThem users that have never before contacted their representative before they used the website.

²⁸ This excludes Northern Ireland but its population is comparatively small and there is little reason to believe the results would be much different. Given that the basic comparator are British Internet users and the sample size of for these is 1,401, in the worst case (ie. 50% share) there will be a confidence interval of +/-2.6% (confidence level 95%) for measures derived from this data. For most measurements the confidence interval will be smaller but for comparison to politically active people or people who have contacted their MP sample sizes are smaller (~687 and ~236 respectively) hence confidence intervals can be larger (up to 3.7 and 6.4 respectively). However, the statistical test of choice is a χ^2 – test to analyse whether or not two distributions are significantly different from each other and which will take the sample size numbers into account.

Table 12: Share of WriteToThem users who contacted representative for the first time ever (2005 - 2010)

year	Councillors	MPs	MEPs	Other	total
2005	53%	44%	36%	37%	43%
2006	60%	47%	33%	37%	47%
2007	63%	47%	38%	39%	47%
2008	59%	46%	36%	42%	46%
2009	58%	44%	35%	38%	44%
2010	56%	40%	34%	37%	41%

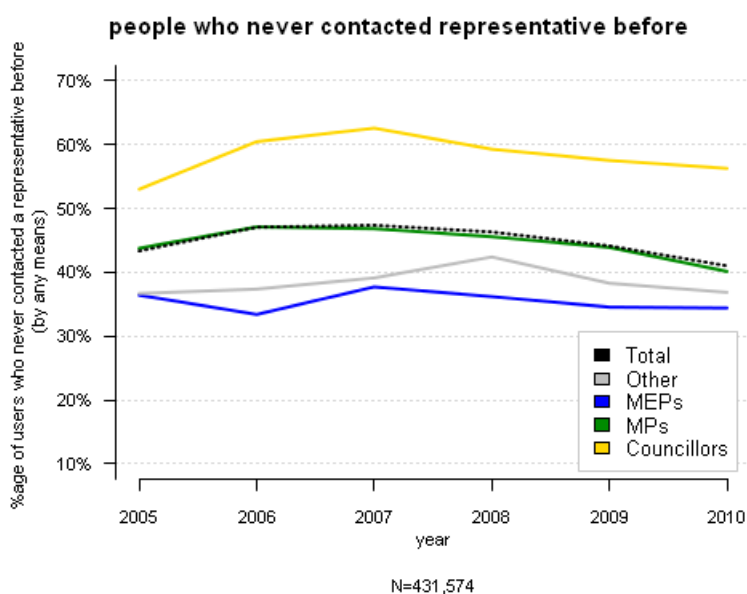


Figure 22: Share of WriteToThem users who had never before contacted their representative (2005 - 2010)

Source: mySociety – WriteToThem simple survey 2005-2010

Note: Based on survey responses of people who used the site until end of 2010.

In 2010, around four out of ten users had never before contacted their representative, which translates into more than 40,000 people. Overall, from 2005 to 2010 more than 200,000 people explicitly stated that they got in touch with a representative for the very first time through the use of WriteToThem. The numbers are likely to be higher, given that not all users were surveyed with this simple survey and some did not reply. What is more, many people who stated they did contact their representative in the past will have done so using WriteToThem. In fact, we see that of those people who have written to a representative before, 5% say also that they have used WriteToThem before (in the question on how they found out about the site). As a case in point, take the following quote from one WriteToThem user:

*“And what about people like me? I’ve contacted my MP several times now, but ***always*** through WriteToThem; so when it asks me “Is this the first time?” I have to say “no”, even though I am someone who was introduced to the idea by WriteToThem.”*

The slow drop in first time users is likely to be caused by a greater rate of people who used the site in the past. Consistently throughout all the years the site was in particular a starting point for political engagement on the local level. Findings from the extended user survey show that people who contact their councillors are significantly more likely to be first-time writers than users who contact other levels of government. The lower rates for MPs and MEPs could be explained by a) councillors being an entry point before people go on to contact representatives on a higher level, b) a greater barrier to contact a national or European representative than a local one, or c) it essentially being one group writing to local level politicians and another one writing to all the higher level politicians.

Invovement with Politics and Community

Digging deeper into the political predispositions of WriteToThem users we see that the majority of users (60%) have not been involved in any other political activities within the last year (this includes for example demonstrations, signing a petition, contacting a politician, boycotting a product, donating money or displaying a campaign badge). As such, WriteToThem users are just about as politically active as the average British Internet user and only slightly more active than the British population in general according to data from OxIS 2009. However, differences do exist in preferences for online and/or offline modes of engagement as WriteToThem users have a strong preferences for using the Internet for their political activities (either exclusively or combined with offline activity) with only few users taking exclusively offline actions (obviously excluding the use of WriteToThem as stated in the question).

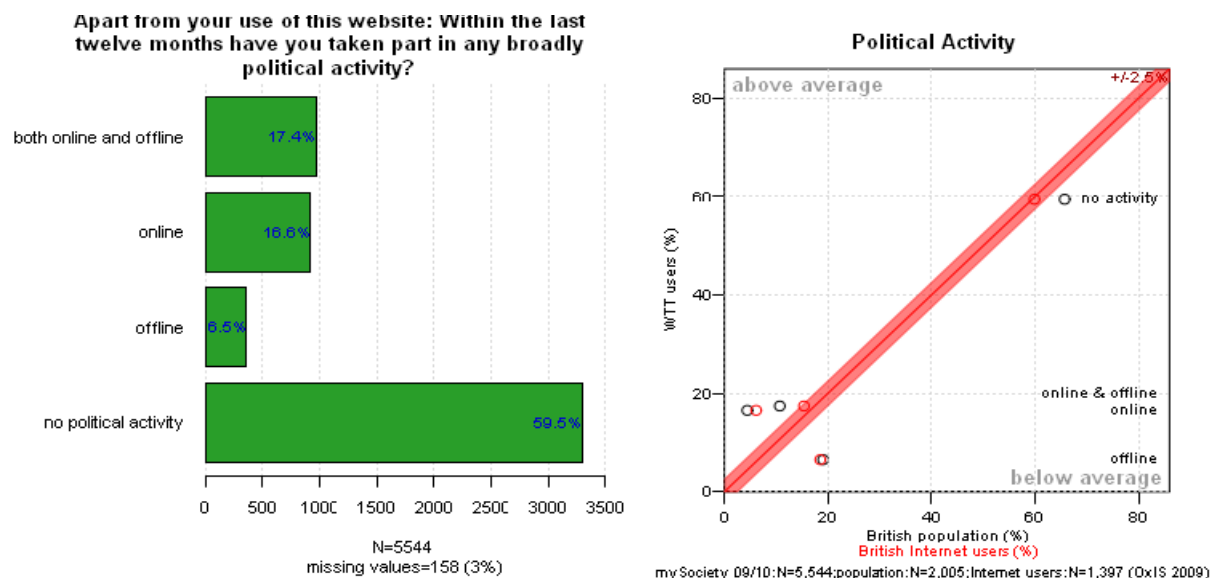


Figure 23: Political involvement of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

In effect, the site reaches out to a large share of otherwise inactive people. This is also supported by findings regarding involvement in political or community groups. Six out of ten WriteToThem users are

not involved in any kind of group, which is a significantly lower level of formal organization than is reported by OxIS for Internet users, citizens who contact politicians or even the population in general. While many more WriteToThem users are involved in community groups²⁹ than in political groups³⁰, the latter are still overrepresented compared to any of the comparator groups from OxIS.

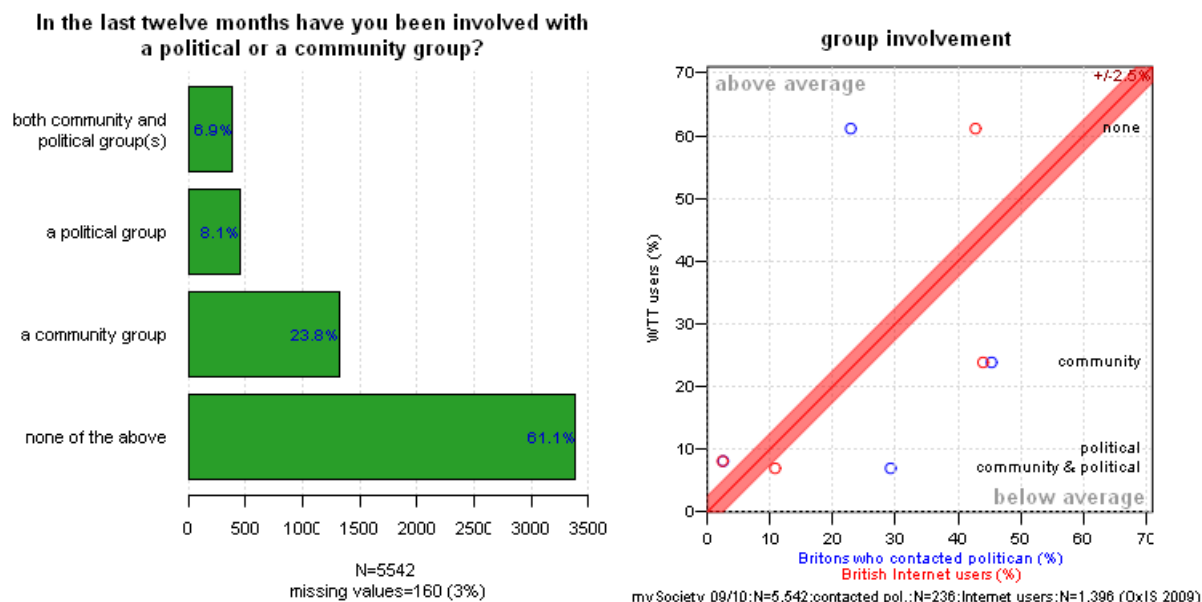


Figure 24: Membership of WriteToThem users in community and/or political groups

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

The distinct profile of people contacting local representatives, as already apparent in the first-time writers, is also supported by the user survey data on political activity. Again people writing to their councillors are significantly less politically active and formally organised than any of the other groups.

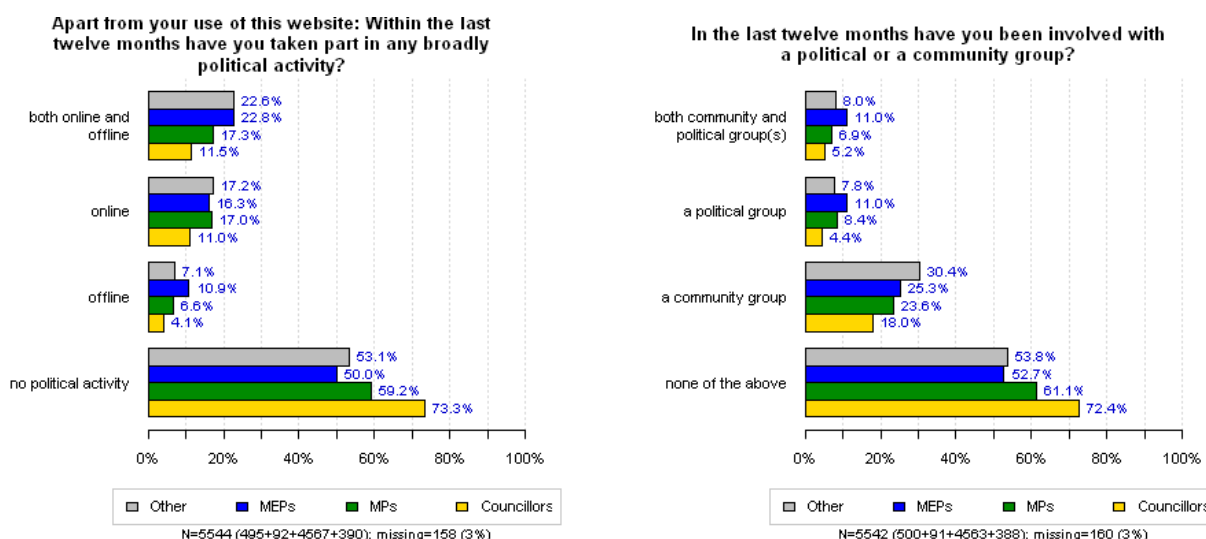


Figure 25: Political involvement of WriteToThem users by type of representative contacted

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

²⁹ such as charities, initiatives, churches, sports clubs or volunteer organisations
³⁰ such as parties, unions or civic organisation e.g. for human rights

By their own admission WriteToThem users are by and large not very politically involved. First of all, there is a large share of users who have never before contacted their political representatives. What is more, WriteToThem users are 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. This shows that WriteToThem successfully reaches out to people who would otherwise not be engaged and as the analysis indicated this happens in particular on the local level.

This empowering function is also acknowledged in some of the comments:

“Thank you for your excellent WriteTothem.com website which definitely encouraged me to write to my MP about an issue I was concerned about. Without your site I probably wouldn't have actually written. Thank you.”

“i think you're site is a great idea - i have only just begun to realise that i can take part in the political process, having previously believed that it was not for me as i did not sufficiently understand it. anything that encourages ordinary people to take part in a constructive way is to be welcomed!”

“It was an efficient way to communicate with my MP - Often, the thought of finding the address and putting pen to paper stops me from making the effort - sure, there is apathy, but also the need to get on with other things.”

“A very good and powerful site, removing many of the stumbling blocks that prevent people contacting those in power. I think it is excellent, and my personal experience of the site was extremely good.”

3.2 Demographics of WriteToThem Users

3.2.1 Gender

While in the UK the two sexes have similar rates of political engagement, the particular activity of getting in touch with a representative has been shown to be clearly dominated by men. Users of WriteToThem exhibit a male bias too with six out of ten users being male. By basically mirroring overall contacting patterns, WriteToThem is not reducing the overall male bias in this political activity. However, there is one exception: The local level is more popular with female users (54%) with on average about 10% more female users than national, European or other levels of government.

Could you please indicate your gender?

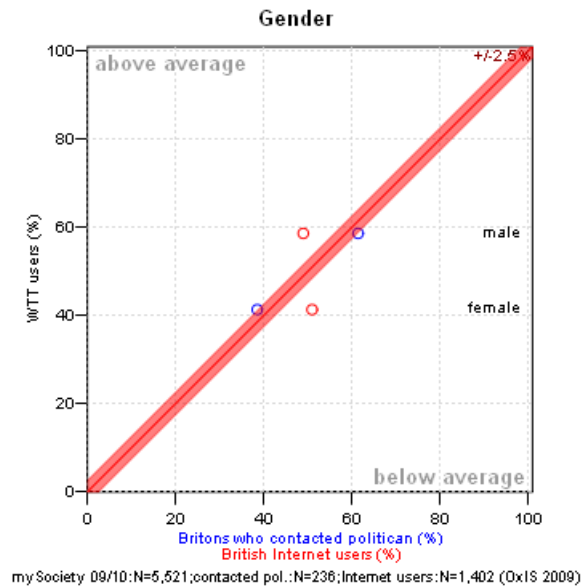
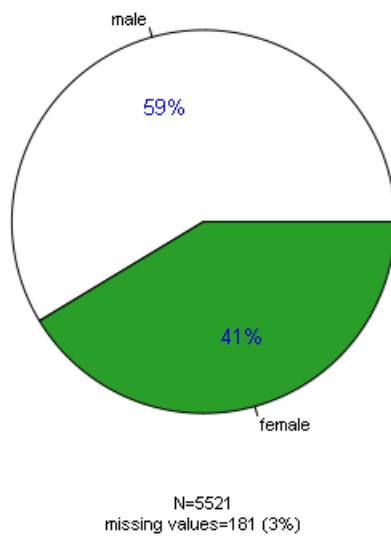


Figure 26: Gender of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

3.2.2 Education

It is a well-established finding that better educated people are more likely to participate in politics and this is in particular the case for contacting politicians. On WriteToThem this gap is even more pronounced with 55% of users having a higher degree. In effect, WriteToThem users are twice as likely to have a higher degree than the average British Internet user.

has a higher degree (ie. University or equivalent)
(excl. students)

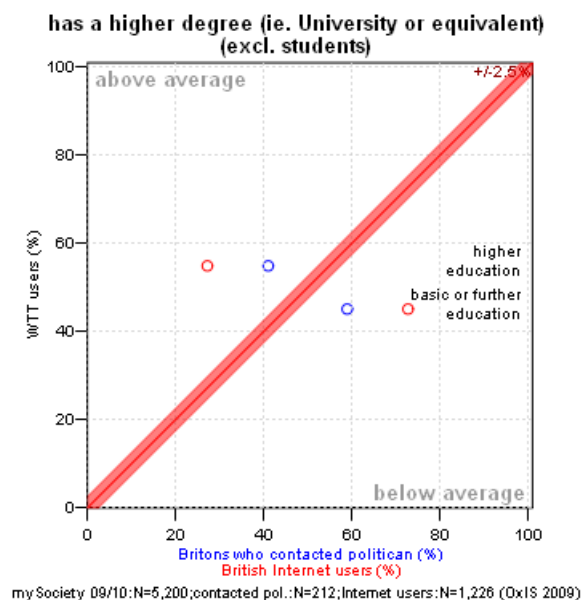
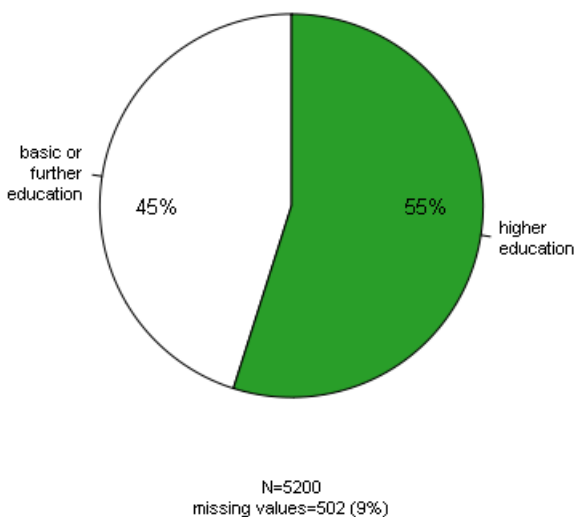


Figure 27: Educational attainment of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

Note: Education is a variable notoriously difficult to measure in particular in Britain with its variety of degrees which are subject to constant change. Hence this research only distinguishes between higher education (i.e. University degree or equivalent) and further education.

The only exception in which highly educated people do not constitute the majority of WriteToThem users is for people contacting their councillors, for which the pattern is almost reversed but still far from being representative of the population.

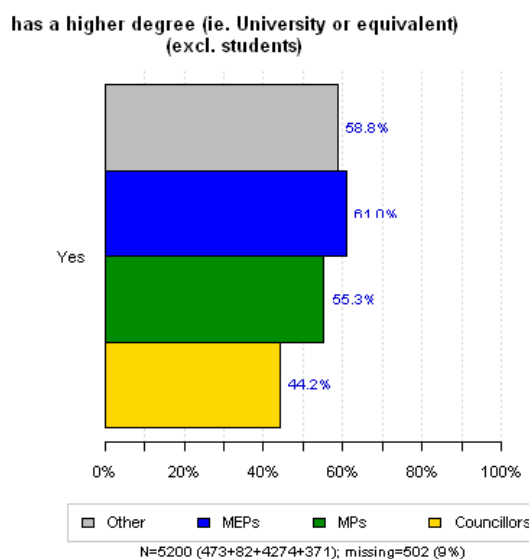


Figure 28: Educational attainment by level of government contacted

Source: *mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10*

3.2.3 Income

Income is problematic to measure, as many people do not want to share this information. In this survey, a quarter of participants chose not to answer the question on income. Despite this, OxIS 2009 shows that income is an important variable, because political participation - and in particular the activity of contacting representatives - is very much resource driven with high-income groups (>£40,000/year) being more active. In the same way, the survey of WriteToThem users shows that those with a high-income (>£37,500) are overrepresented on the site – their share on the WriteToThem audience is twice as high as their share on the British Internet population according to OxIS. At the same time, low-income groups are well represented amongst users of WriteToThem, but this is of course only true in relation to the British Internet population, which is in itself biased toward resource rich people.

If we compare the users of WriteToThem only with OxIS data on those parts of the population that have contacted a politician, there are no significant differences. In other words, as far as income is concerned, it does not seem to make a difference if representatives are contacted via WriteToThem or via other means.

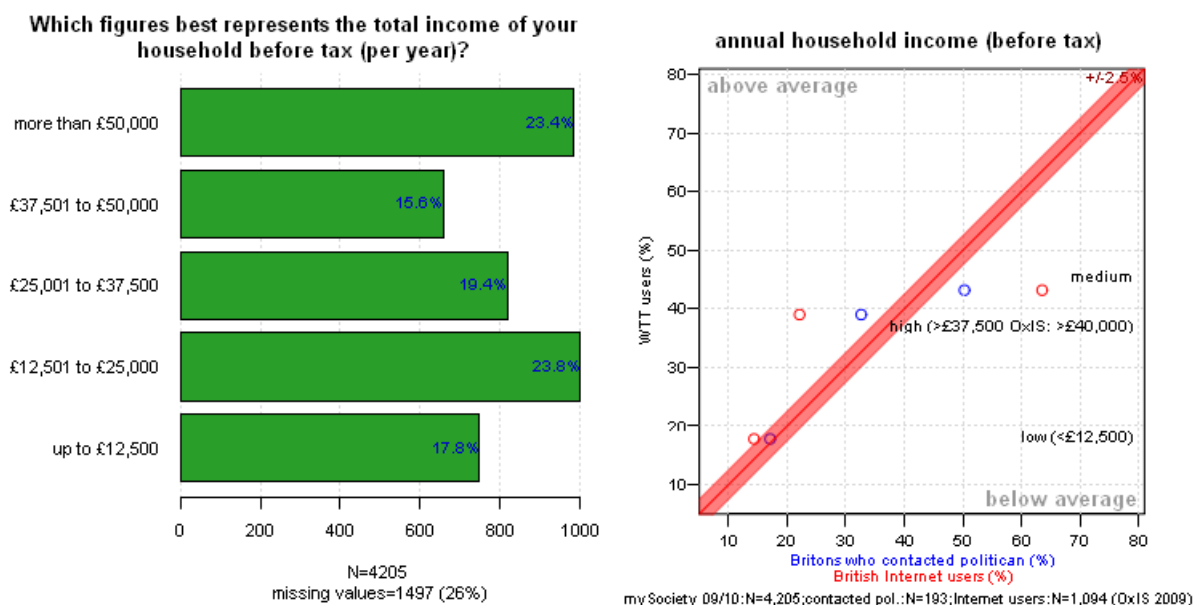


Figure 29: Income situation of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

There are no significant income differences among people who contact different levels of government. Given the finding that users of WriteToThem tend to be highly educated, one might expect that the lowest income group is mainly made up of students. But while the lowest income group has indeed the highest share of students (12%), this is also true for the unemployed (20%), sick or disabled people (13%) and home carers (7%). In essence, the rather good representation of low-income groups on WriteToThem is indeed a genuine sign of reaching out to the poorer citizens.

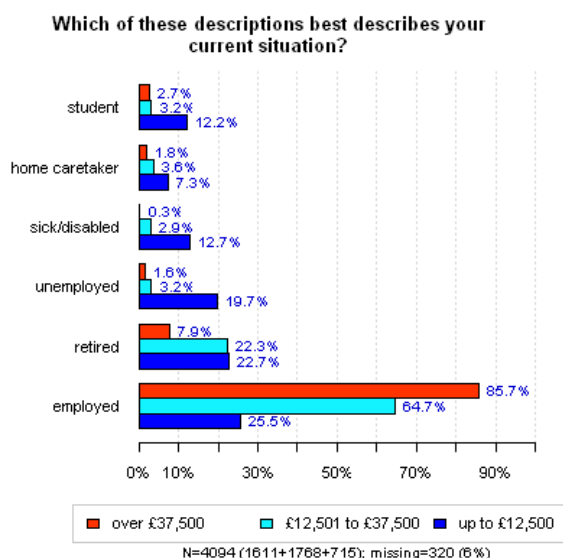


Figure 30: Income of WriteToThem users by occupation

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

3.2.4 Age

The activity of writing to a representative has a tendency to attract more people in older age groups, in particular from 45 years of age onwards. This is also apparent on WriteToThem, where usage is concentrated for people aged 35 to 64 years. Compared to the average British Internet user, people younger than 35 are less likely and people from 45 years onwards are more likely to use the site. Older people (65+) are well represented, but this is largely a function of the inequalities in Internet access for this group. OxiS data on people who contact politicians in general shows that WriteToThem extends in particular the overrepresentation of the 55-64 age bracket. The main finding is that teenagers (<18 yrs) stay largely out of reach of the site. They hardly use the site at all, which is all the more remarkable given that most of the young actually have the technical means to use the site – indeed, about 8% indicated that they have used the Internet to get in touch with a politician. But on WriteToThem, these account only for one in a hundred users.

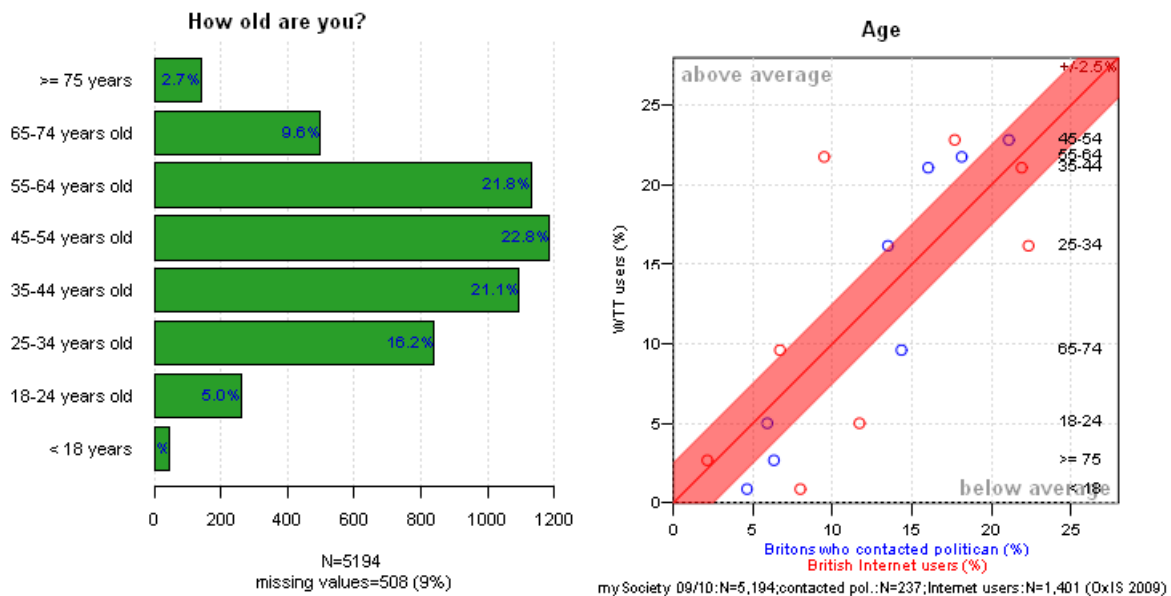


Figure 31: Age of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxiS) 2009

MEPs are most likely to be contacted by young people (≤ 24 yrs). Councillors do not hear very often from young people (≤ 24 yrs) or from old people (65+ yrs). For all levels of government, the largest group of people who get in touch is between 45 and 54 years old.

3.2.5 Occupation

Political participation is also related to occupation, even though not very strongly. For example, the data from OxiS shows that in the British population, only 17% of the unemployed have engaged in political activities within the last year, while people in employment (38%), retirement (34%) or students (40%) were more than twice as likely to do so. However, in most situations people are equally likely to participate. The numbers for contacting politicians are not much different, but it is in particular retired people who engage in this activity. While on WriteToThem about two thirds of users are currently in employment and as such

overrepresented compared to the British population, this mirrors the Internet population in the UK. It slightly mitigates the bias towards retired people in contacting, but these are still overrepresented. Encouraging findings relate to the good representation of unemployed people, while the failure to reach out to students is in line with the findings on age discussed above. There are no relevant differences by type of representative contacted.

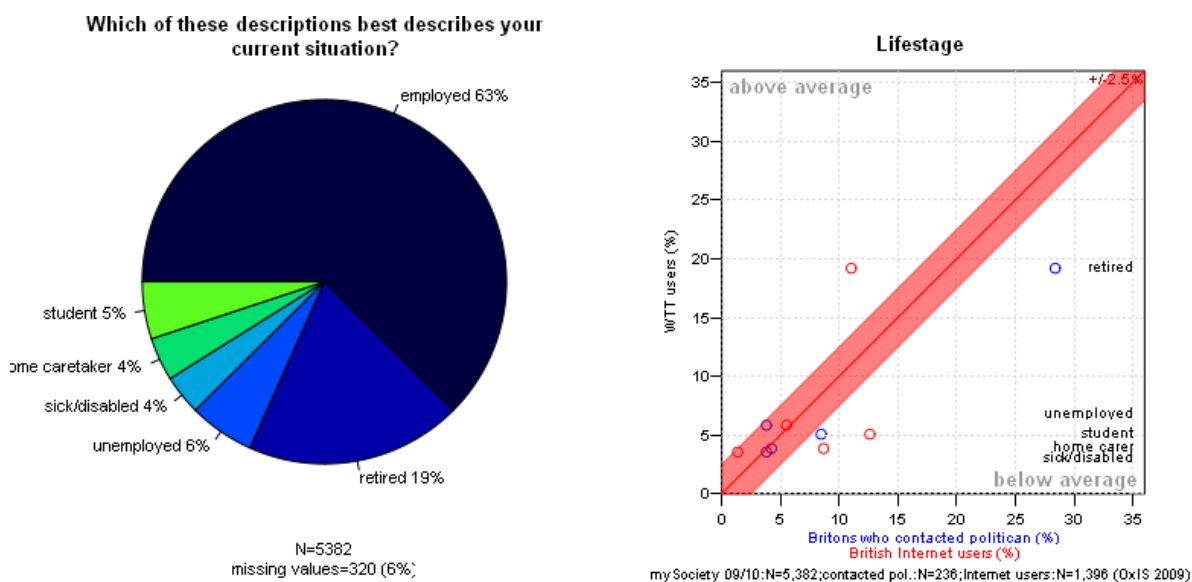


Figure 32: Current occupation of WriteToThem users

Source: *mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009*

3.2.6 Ethnicity

Questions regarding ethnic background are difficult because they measure a sensitive issue, and the usually small numbers of respondents with minority backgrounds make analysis problematic. Due to this, there is no reliable data available from the Oxford Internet Survey on the ethnicity of people contacting their politician. A comparison with both the British population as well as the British Internet population shows no significant differences from the user pattern on WriteToThem, suggesting a rather good representation of minority groups amongst the users of the website. But again, this finding is not very reliable as almost one out of ten users opted not to answer this question.

To which one of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

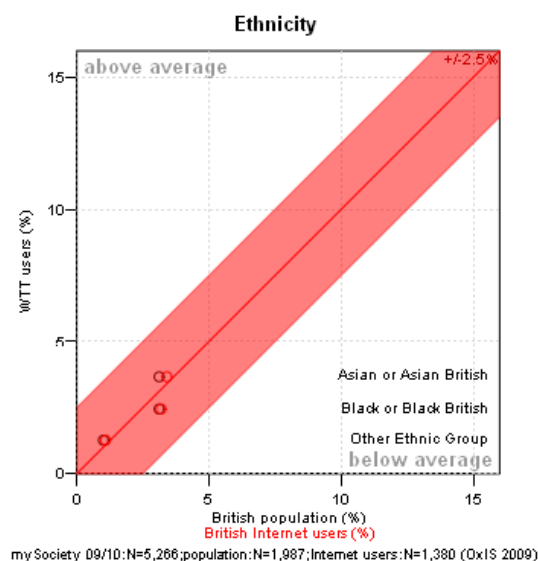
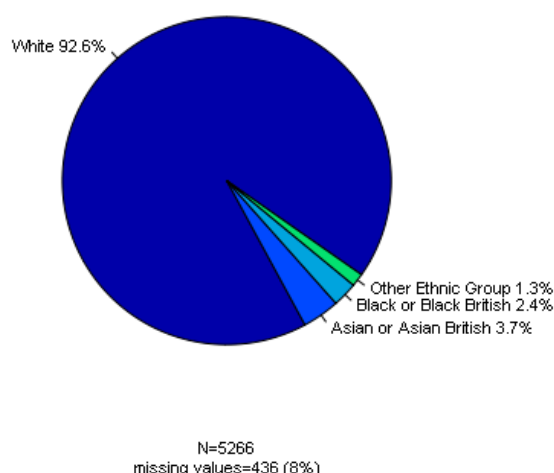


Figure 33: Ethnic background of WriteToThem users

Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009

The only noticeable difference in contacting behaviour is that users with a minority background seem to be less likely to contact an MEP, but the significance of this finding cannot be determined due to insufficient data.

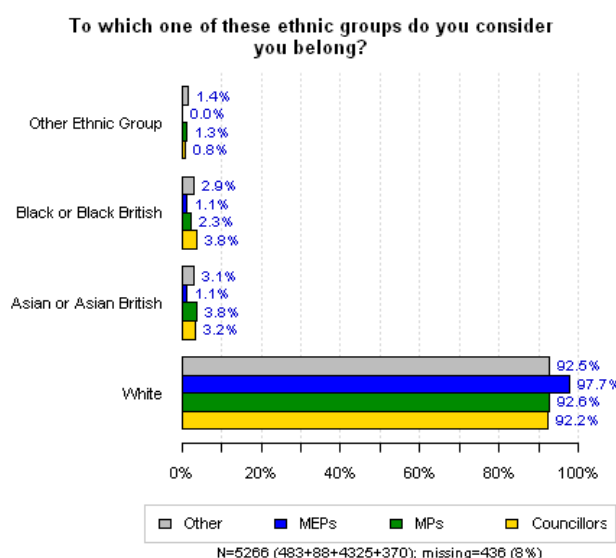


Figure 34: Ethnic background by type of representative contacted

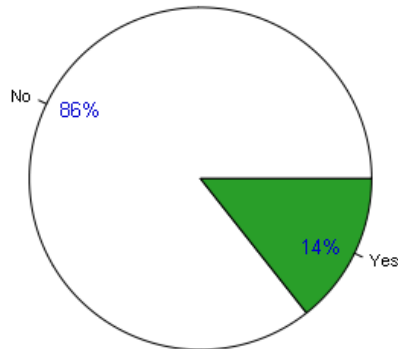
Source: mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

3.2.7 Disability

According to the Oxford Internet Survey, citizens with disabilities show few signs of being disadvantaged when it comes to political participation and contacting in particular. However, they are less likely to have Internet access and hence are less often active in contacting representatives online. This is largely a function of age as older age groups are both more likely to have a disability and less likely to have Internet access. In this respect, WriteToThem reaches a surprisingly large share of people with disabilities, which

indicates a certain bias towards people with disabilities. There are no significant differences among people who contact different levels of government.

Do you have a health problem or disability which prevents you from doing every day tasks at home, work or school or which limits the kind or amount of work you can do?



N=5236
missing values=466 (8%)

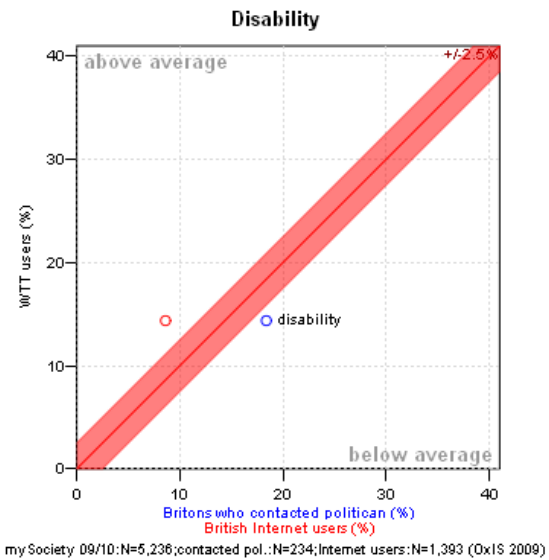


Figure 35: WriteToThem users with health problems and disabilities

Source: *mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10; comparative data from Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009*

4 Ecosystem

4.1 Communication Demands on Representatives

One of the more regularly voiced concerns is that emails and especially platforms like WriteToThem might result in an unduly large number of messages to representatives with the result that they might not be able to cope, a suspicion that was for example raised by one of the users:

“The site is an excellent idea, I'm just not convinced that the politicians take it seriously yet. Maybe it just makes it too easy for people like me to write to them, with the result that they get a lot of inconsequential junk. Maybe WriteToThem needs to censor messages that are sent from the website to weed out any junk and misuse?!”

Apart from the fact that WriteToThem employs a variety of sophisticated measures to stop chain-letter campaigns and other misuse the issue itself merits further investigation. Therefore in the summer of 2008 we conducted a very small and informal survey amongst MPs in order to assess the amount of communication from constituents they have to deal with on a regular basis. We informally surveyed a sample of 20 very responsive MPs (according to the 2007 WriteToThem league table) as well as 20 MPs with very low response rates. Tellingly, of the top 20 we received a response from 9 MPs (45%) while from the bottom only 4 MPs answered (20%) of which one did not want to share the numbers and another one could simply not provide them. Hence the following estimates are based on responses from 11 MPs only but they should nevertheless give some indication of the general communication-related workload of representatives in Westminster. The information we received indicates that MPs receive per week:

- something between 100 to 500 emails with an average in this small sample of about 360 emails per week
- 50-350 phone calls with an average of 180
- anything between 100-500 letters with an average of 230

It was often difficult for the offices to tell us how much were directly from constituents or related to their concerns. Estimates range from 30 emails per week to 350 which are directly or indirectly related to constituents' concerns, in addition 30-350 phone calls and 30-500 letters (although seems closer to around 50 per week).

Again, these figures provide only a very rough guidance but even if one only takes the number from the lower end of the vast spectrum we observed, this clearly shows that the amount of messages sent to MPs via WriteToThem is very small in relation to the overall communication they receive, given that WriteToThem accounts on average for only about four messages of all the emails an MP receives per week (see section 2.2 Messages Delivered).

4.2 Political Engagement in Britain

The most general measure of political participation is voter turnout. This has been declining in the UK since the early 1990s. While in 1992 almost 80% of those eligible to vote actually did turn out, even the most recent General Election of May 2010 had only 65% of those eligible actually casting their vote (Tetteh, 2008: 18:18; BBC News, 2010). Looking beyond turnout to more specific acts of political participation the numbers are even smaller. According to the Oxford Internet Survey in 2009 about two thirds of the population had not been politically active at all within the previous year. This leaves a third of the population that is active to some degree and for those, signing petitions (69%), deliberately buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons (41%) and contacting politicians or government officials (35%) are the most popular forms of participation. For the particular form of participation that WriteToThem focuses on, it can be seen that a remarkable 12% of the UK population have contacted a politician, government or local government official in the last year. This translates into roughly 6m British people (based on a population of 50.3m British citizens aged 14 years and older, see Office for National Statistics, 2010) that have engaged in this activity within the last twelve months, even though probably less than this number contacted specifically their representative. About half of these people, i.e. about 3m, have (also) used the Internet for getting in touch. About 8% of Internet users have used the Internet to contact a politician online.

Not only are the numbers of people participating in political activities rather small, those people that do also constitute a particular group of the population. Research into political participation has consistently established that people who are politically engaged are heavily biased towards resource-rich parts of the population (Parry et al., 1992; Deth, 2006; Milbrath, 1965; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). In effect politically active people in Britain differ from the general population in a variety of important aspects. They are better educated (50% more people with a higher degree than in the population), have a higher income (50% more people have a household income before tax of more than £40,000 a year) at the expense of low income groups (less than £12,500 a year) and are clearly more often organised in political groups (23% have participated in the activities of a political group within the last year vs 11% in population). They also tend to be in their forties or fifties (45 to 64 years old) and are more often in employment. For a detailed overview refer to section D Detailed Survey Results and Comparative Data.

The profile of participants varies in relation to the specific activity carried out. British people who have contacted a politician within the last year differ even more from the general population than politically active people in general. People who contact a representative are twice as likely to have a higher degree in addition to an underrepresentation of people with low income. These biases are even more pronounced for those who rely (also) on the Internet for this activity, in particular for people with a low income who are three times less likely to contact a politician online than could be expected from their share of the population.

The potential of information and communication technologies to overcome this participation bias is severely limited by the digital divide as both access to the Internet and the skills to use it are not equally distributed. It is in particular those groups that are already excluded from traditional participation that are

also more likely to be excluded from the Internet and lack the appropriate skill base (Helsper, 2008). The combination of biased political participation and the digital divide is expected to produce even more uneven results in terms of online political participation. As a result, several authors (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Gibson et al., 2005; Hindman, 2008) have found that online participation is not more but may in fact be less inclusive than offline participation.

4.3 Similar Sites

Similar services to WriteToThem exist outside the UK and often the British site has served as an example or was even directly copied.

Table 13: Websites similar to WriteToThem

address	country	description
www.meinparlament.at	Austria	allows questions to members of the Austrian parliament (Nationalrat) and the Austrian members of the European Parliament, based on German Abgeordnetenwatch software (see below); set up 22.08.2008 with little use so far
www.abgeordnetenwatch.de	Germany	questions are public and combined with general information about representatives similar to TheyWorkForYou.com; started in December 2006 it can be used to pose questions to MPs as well as members of selected federal states. In 2009 a total of about 30,000 questions was asked, around 80% of those questions have received a proper response.
www.direktZu.de	Germany	originated from a student initiative; enables citizens to pose questions to some of the leading German politicians (currently these include the chancellor Angela Merkel, the president of the German Bundestag Norbert Lammert and the Minister-Presidents of the states of Bavaria and Brandenburg. Each site is set up in cooperation with the representative. Every week the users of the website vote on the top questions and the winning questions are subsequently answered by the representative.
www.manoseimas.lt	Lithuania	Mano Seimas (My Parliament) gives information about representatives and can be used to contact MPs. Mano Seimas is an e-democracy project by the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University.
www.politikercheck.lu	Luxemburg	started in April 2009 to question members and candidates for parliament; also based on German Abgeordnetenwatch
www.maildepolitiek.nl	Netherlands	questions are public
www.yoosk.com	United Kingdom	similar to the German DirektZu: Users are invited to pose questions which are rated by the community. The highest rated questions are put before representatives who answer via video.

5 Anecdota

Throughout the years WriteToThem has been used (and at times abused) by various efforts and its existence had all kinds of unforeseen consequences. Here are some WriteToThem anecdotes:

- On 28 April 2009 The Mirror newspaper urged its readers to email their MPs in a campaign to get full citizenship rights for Gurkhas who fought for Britain. This resulted in the busiest day ever on WriteToThem with more than 11,000 people using the site within a single day³¹.
- In 2008 the Times newspaper ran a campaign against the injustices resulting from the 1989 Children's Act which won the Paul Foot award for campaigning journalism³² and used a WriteToThem widget on its site³³.
- The BBC Wales website is linking to WriteToThem.com to allow people to find their political representatives and write to them³⁴.
- WriteToThem even made it into a book published by Guardian Books in 2008 which explains how to effectively protest³⁵.
- On 19th September 2007, despite the clear policy and technical precautions to prevent spamming representatives by copy-and-paste letters, the low-cost airline EasyJet asked subscribers to their newsletter to use WriteToThem.com to ask MPs for scrapping the Airline Passenger Duty, leading to such an increased traffic that the site temporarily went down and easyJet subsequently apologised and donated £5,000 to the project³⁶.
- Various anecdotes shed light on how representatives are actually looking to their league table ranking. In February 2006 Conservative MP Iain Liddell-Grainger hit the national news by sending some emails to himself in order to "assess" his ranking³⁷. What it highlighted was that these rankings do indeed start to have an impact as Liddell-Grainger mentioned:

"Yet my figures are very low. It is being used by an opponent to damage my standing."

- As a sign of FaxYourMP's popularity in as early as 2002, a National Opinion Poll of a representative sample of the population found that 2% of the population had heard about FaxYourMP, among Internet users this was even 3% (Gibson et al., 2002).

³¹ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/04/28/treat-gurkhas-like-the-heroes-they-are-115875-21314272/>

³² http://www.private-eye.co.uk/sections.php?section_link=paul_foot

³³ http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/families/article4213714.ece

³⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/culture/sites/politics/pages/elected_representatives.shtml?loc=LL57+2BY

³⁵ Bibi van der Zee (2008): "Rebel, Rebel: The Protestor's Handbook", Guardian Books.

³⁶ http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/09/19/easyjet_spam_writetothem/

³⁷ BBC News, 21.02.2006 "Site axes MP over 'fake' emails." http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4735330.stm [20.10.2008]; see also this topic on the mySociety blog: <http://www.mysociety.org/2006/02/22/ian-liddell-grainger/>

- The band Radiohead has encouraged their fans various times (including a mention on its album 'OK Computer' and a link on their website) to use the service to write their MPs, e.g. about climate change.³⁸
- In January 2001, an email reached the then brand new FaxYourMP.com service which may well have marked the site's first genuine success. In it an elderly person spoke of how the site had helped her - with a fax to her MP - to get the Winter Heating allowance she was entitled to but had been arguing about with the Department of Social Security for six months.

³⁸ <http://www.writetothem.com/stats/2007/zeitgeist#referrers>

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C. Methodology

C.1. Surveys

Two different surveys were conducted in order to collect anonymous information from WriteToThem users. From early on (i.e. April 2002) users of the site were emailed a *short survey* two to three weeks³⁹ after they had sent a message via the site, asking them whether their representative had replied and whether it was the first time they had ever written to their representative. A second *extended survey* was launched in late June 2008 in order to get a more detailed picture on the demography and political engagement of WriteToThem users, and ask about their experience using the site. Users were presented with this extended survey once they had completed the original short survey, it was completely anonymous and the answers given could not be connected to any activity on the site. The analysis covered three broad areas (for the complete questionnaire see C.1.2 Extended Survey Questionnaire):

1. site usage and user experience
2. political involvement of users
3. user demographics

The analysis in this report is based on data from both surveys. Data for the simple survey has been continuously collected since April 2002 and usually achieves an excellent response rate of around 60-70%. It consists of a total of 460,537 responses including multiple responses by users who used the site repeatedly. Data for the extended survey included in this report was collected from 15 May 2009 until 28 February 2010, which means it will mainly include people who used the site between 1 May 2009 and 15 February 2010 (assuming most people answered the survey as soon as they got the invitation). It includes responses from 5,702 users (minimum 40% response rate). See also section C.2 Survey Response Rates.

C.1.1. Simple Survey Questionnaire

Two weeks after a message was sent via WriteToThem.com, users receive the following email:

xxx weeks ago we sent your letter to 'recipient_name', your 'recipient_position'. (For reference, there's a copy of your letter at the bottom of this email)

- If you HAVE had a reply (not just an acknowledgement), please click on the link below

- If you HAVE NOT had a reply, or you have only had an acknowledgement, please click on the link below:

Clicking on the link will open a web page in the user's browser, which will then display another question:

Is this the first time you've ever contacted one of your political representatives, by any means? YES / NO

³⁹ The questionnaire is sent out two weeks after the message was delivered to the representative and again one week later if there was no response from the user.

C.1.2. Extended Survey Questionnaire

This was displayed to the user after answering the simple survey (see previous section), provided that this user had not previously completed the extended survey.

Thanks again! ... just a few more questions

We (i.e. the people from mySociety, the independent non-profit which runs this site) hate to bother you with this, but we need to know whether our site is used by a representative share of the population (we would not want to only serve one particular group exclusively). We know we ask some personal stuff but be assured:

- The questions from here on are **completely anonymous**
- We only record whether you've answered or not. So nobody (not even we) can know how YOU answered.
- This also means that we cannot connect your answers to whatever you do on our sites.
- Of course we would like you to answer all questions but you don't have to if you feel it's none of our business.
- These are all the questions. **We won't ask more.** So it should take only 5 or so minutes.

Your feedback will help us **make the site better** and help us tell more people about it.

Were you satisfied with the response you got from your representative?⁴⁰

- Yes
- No
- don't want to answer
- *feel free to tell us why*

Will you reply to the answer you got from your representative?⁴¹

- Yes
- No
- don't want to answer

How likely is it that you would recommend this site to a friend or colleague? (assuming they would be interested in such a service)

- from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 10 (*extremely likely*)
- *feel free to tell us why*
- don't want to answer

How did you find out about this site?

- from another mySociety site
- from media such as newspapers, etc
- from a search engine (e.g. Google or Yahoo)
- recommendation by friends or colleagues
- from a campaigning website
- used this site before
- other (*please specify*)
- can't remember
- don't want to answer

⁴⁰ Only asked of users who indicated they got a reply.

⁴¹ Only asked of users who indicated they got a reply.

In the last twelve months have you been involved with a political or a community group, e.g. by being a formal member or by volunteering?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a political group (e.g. a party, an union, a civic organisation e.g. for human rights) • a community group (e.g. a charity, an initiative, a church, a sports club, a volunteer organisation) • both community as well as political group(s) • none of the above • don't want to answer
Apart from your use of this website: Within the last twelve months have you taken part in any broadly political activity? (This includes for example demonstrations, signing a petition, contacting a politician, boycotting a product, donating money or displaying a campaign badge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes, online • yes, offline • yes both online as well as offline • none of the above • don't want to answer
How old are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less than 18 years old • 18-24 years old • 25-29 years old • 30-34 years old • 35-39 years old • 40-44 years old • 45-49 years old • 50-54 years old • 55-59 years old • 55-64 years old • 60-64 years old • 65-69 years old • 70-74 years old • 75 years and older • don't want to answer
Could you please indicate your gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • female • male • don't want to answer
Do you have any educational, professional, vocational or other work-related qualifications for which you received a certificate? (This includes certificates such as GCSE, A-levels, BA and MA degrees, NVQ/SVQ, BTEC, RSA diplomas, being a chartered accountant or surveyor, nursing or another medical qualification, etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • don't want to answer
If you have answered yes to the previous question: Was your highest qualification...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at degree level or above, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ higher degree and postgraduate qualifications ○ first degree (e.g. BA) ○ postgraduate diplomas and certificates (including PGCE) ○ professional qualifications at degree level e.g. graduate member of professional institute, chartered accountant ○ NVQ or SVQ level 4 or 5 • below degree level, all other qualifications not mentioned above such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ diplomas in higher education & other higher education qualifications ○ HNC, HND, Higher level BTEC ○ teaching qualifications for schools or further

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> education (below Degree level standard) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ nursing, or other medical qualifications not covered above (below Degree level standard) ○ RSA higher diploma ○ NVQ/SVQ level 1, 2 and 3 ○ A-levels, GCSE • don't want to answer
Which of these descriptions best describes your current situation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working full time (30 hours a week or more) • working part time (8-29 hours a week) • retired • unemployed • permanently sick or disabled • in community or military service • undergraduate student • postgraduate student • in full time education (not degree or higher) • in part time education (not degree or higher) • doing housework, looking after children or other persons • none of the above • don't want to answer
The incomes of households differ a lot in Britain today. Which figures best represents the total income of your household before tax?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to £12,500 • £12,501 to £25,000 • £25,001 to £37,500 • £37,501 to £50,000 • £50,001 to £75,000 • £75,001 to £100,000 • more than £100,000 • don't want to answer
To which one of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ British ○ English ○ Welsh ○ Scottish ○ Irish ○ Other white • Mixed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White and Black Caribbean ○ White and Black African ○ White and Asian ○ Other Mixed • Asian or Asian British <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Indian ○ Pakistani ○ Bangladeshi ○ Other Asian • Black or Black British <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caribbean ○ African ○ Other Black • Chinese • any other ethnic group • don't know • don't want to answer

Do you have a health problem or disability which prevents you from doing every day tasks at home, work or school or which limits the kind or amount of work you can do?

- Yes
- No
- don't want to answer

Do you have any other comments (e.g. on the survey, on your usage, etc)?

C.2. Survey Response Rates

C.2.1. Simple Survey

The simple survey was only sent to those people who had used the site to send a message to one representative at a time, not to several of them at once (bulk messages, see Figure 11). The number of responses collected with the simple survey is plotted below.

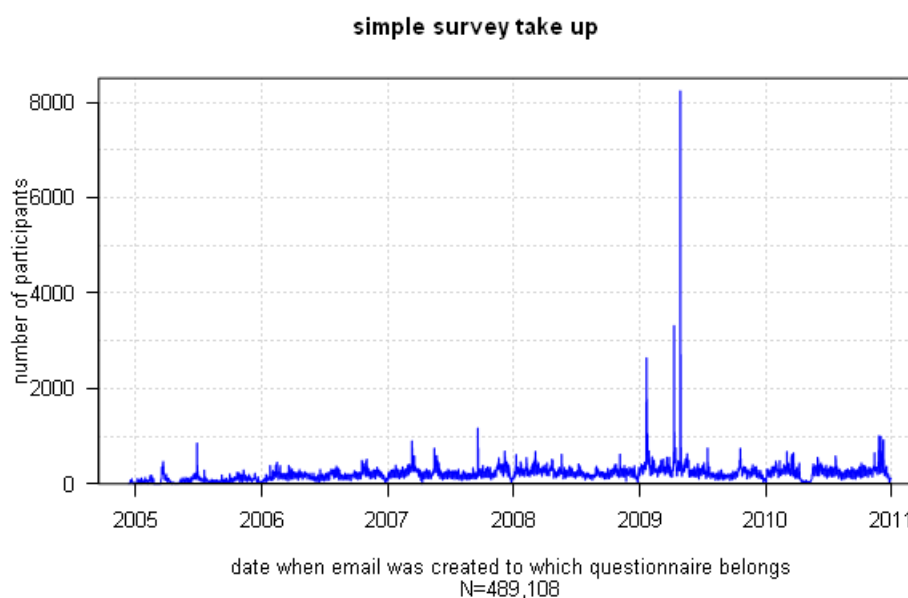


Figure 36: Take up of simple survey over time (2005 - 2010)

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem simple survey 2005-2010*

Note: *Date plotted is the date the email was created, not the date when the simple survey was actually answered which can be anything from 2 weeks onwards.*

On average, on any single day about 220 replies are received, which already indicates that the response rate to this short survey is very good. In fact, the majority of users do answer.

Table 14: Response rates of simple survey (2005 - 2010)

year	response rate to question 'Did representative reply'	response rate to question 'was this the first time you've ever contacted ...'
2005	70%	67%
2006	76%	70%
2007	72%	66%
2008	72%	63%
2009	75%	64%
2010	73%	61%

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem simple survey 2005-2010*

Note: *The simple survey was only sent to users who sent a single message to a single representative (even though repeatedly) but not those who sent a bulk message. Data for 2010 is based on messages sent until 31 December and replies to the questionnaire received until early February 2011.*

There is considerable difference in the response rate depending on the type of representative that was contacted, as Table 15 reports. Noticeable is the good response rate for MPs, which – due to the large number of messages – drives the overall response rate. People who send messages to other types of representatives are less likely to respond to the follow-up survey, in particular if they write to MEPs.

Table 15: Response rate to simple survey according to level of government contacted (2005-2010)

year	Councillor	MP	MEP	Other
2005	67%	74%	56%	63%
2006	71%	78%	65%	71%
2007	58%	77%	48%	68%
2008	57%	76%	49%	66%
2009	60%	79%	49%	70%
2010	61%	76%	57%	69%

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem simple survey 2005-2010*

Note: *The simple survey was only sent to users who sent a single message to a single representative (even though repeatedly) but not those who sent a bulk message.. Data for 2010 is based on messages sent until 31 December and replies to the questionnaire received until early February 2011. Only answers to the first question (did your representative reply?) were counted*

C.2.2. Extended Survey

The timeframe on the basis of which the response rate is calculated runs from 1 May 2009 until 15 February 2010, i.e. two weeks ahead of the survey timeframe, as an invitation to the survey was emailed to users two weeks after they had used the site to send a message. During this timeframe the site was used 103,509 times by 76,034 people (based on distinct email addresses). People who sent the same message to

several representatives at once (i.e. bulk messages, possible for example at local level and European level) did not receive a questionnaire as it was thought that any answer of whether or not a response was received could not be clearly attributed to a single representative. In total 71,377 people used the site to send at least one message during the time frame. Given the random selection procedure applied we can estimate that one in five, i.e. around 14,275 people would have received the invitation to the survey if and only if they did not answer the questionnaire before – something we cannot determine given the stringent privacy controls in place. This results in the following response rate:

Table 16: Response rate for extended survey

Invited to survey <i>(if they did not get it before which we do not know)</i>	14,275
Co-operation rate <i>(did submit questionnaire)</i>	6,073 (43%)
Completion rate <i>(defined as having answered at least 2/3s of questionnaire, i.e. missed not more than 4 out of 11 essential variables)</i>	5,702 (94% completed; 51% fully completed)
Response rate <i>(completed surveys from total people contacted)</i>	40% (5,702 / 14,275)

Note: Resulting response rate is a lower bound as number of people invited to survey is likely to be lower, given that some of the users will have answered the questionnaire previously.

The response rate of 40% is a lower bound because people who had answered the survey previously were not invited. The survey had been running since late 2008 and, given the high participation rates, it is clear that some of the people included in the survey time frame had taken part before and hence were not invited again. The calculation cannot account for these people as due to the strict privacy rules in place it is not possible to determine who received an invitation.

All questionnaires contain questions people are not confident in answering, and we made all our questions optional. Nevertheless an analysis needs a certain amount of data per subject. We defined that subjects would need to have answered at least two thirds of the questionnaire (i.e. not more than four missing questions out of the eleven presented to everybody⁴²), which leaves a satisfactory 94% of people that started to answer the questionnaire and also completed it.

⁴²

Essential variables are netpromoter, referrer, groups, activity, age, gender, education_any, lifestage, income, ethnicity, disability

The questions that people most often refused to answer were⁴³:

1. income (26%)
2. age (9%)
3. education (9%)
4. disability (8%)
5. ethnicity (8%)

The number of answered surveys did vary, which should mostly be accountable to the variation in actual usage of the site during this period.

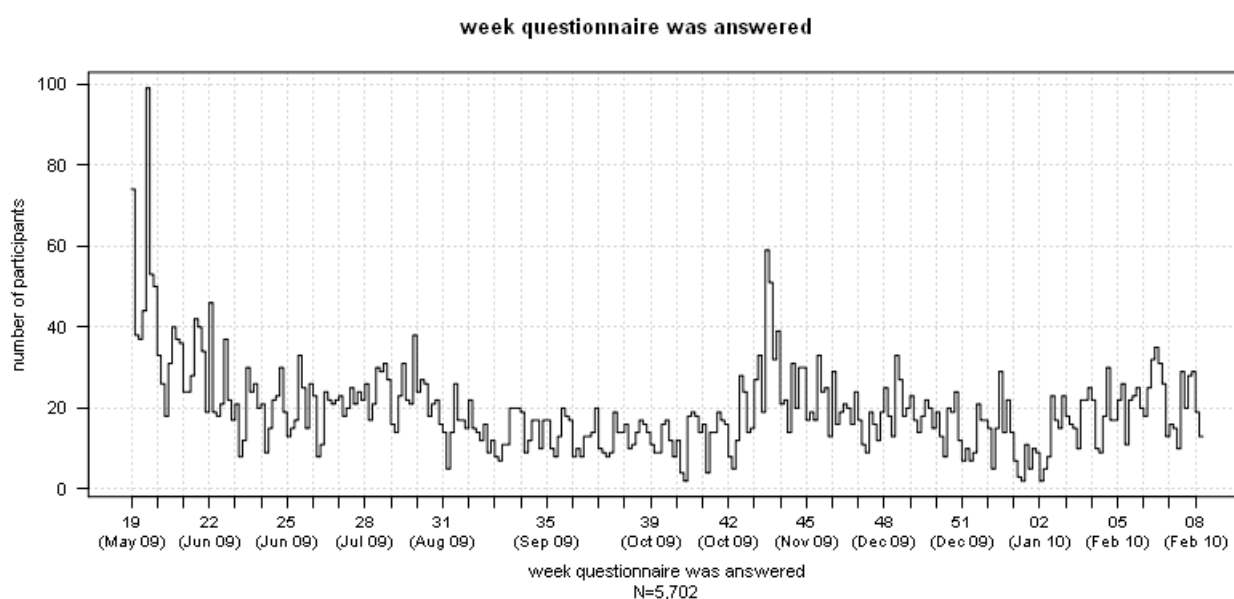


Figure 37: Number of responses to extended survey over time.

Source: *mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10*

C.3. Sample Bias / Representativeness

There are three important potential sources of error for the representativeness of the WriteToThem user survey. These are i) coverage errors, ii) sampling errors and iii) non-response errors (Groves, 1989).

Coverage errors occur when some people in the survey population, i.e. the population about which the research is supposed to say something via the survey, are not included in the sampling frame, i.e. the list of people within the population from which participants to the survey are recruited. Unfortunately, this is a problem for the user surveys on WriteToThem because these are only sent to people who have sent a single message to a single representative and not a bulk messages to several representatives of the same level of government at once. Figure 11 illustrates this problem by showing how often users decide to send a bulk message. This is a particular problem for MEPs where about every other use is to send a bulk message but also for councillors for which in 40% of use cases a bulk message is sent. Given the fact that

⁴³ percentage based on people that completed the questionnaire (ie. not more than 4 missing variables)

four out of five users used the site only once during the survey time frame this means that most of those users who came to the site to send a bulk message will never have received an invitation to the survey. In effect, the sampling frame reaches only 94% of the actual WriteToThem population in the time frame (76,034 unique users during time frame of which 4,657 only sent bulk message(s)). This is a problem if we assume that such users would differ in their characteristics from those who sent single messages. This is not clear. The problem is mitigated by the fact that two-thirds of usage is for emailing MPs where bulk messages are not possible anyway.

The second kind of error is a *sampling error* that occurs if not all users in the sampling frame have the same probability to be included in the sample. While the random sampling applies to all users equally (excluding those with bulk messages, see above) those who use the site repeatedly can receive the survey invitation more than once – if they are randomly selected and if they have not replied to the survey before. This is not ideal but the technical effort to prevent this could not be justified and would also have had some privacy implications. Given that only 18% of users (13,704) used the site more than once during the survey time frame and a sampling strategy of selecting one in five these multiple invites would apply to a maximum of about 3.5% of all users. Given that around 40% of these users will have answered the survey and some might have done so previously the problem will be rather small even though there is a chance of a slight overrepresentation of frequent users. The precise extent of this problem cannot be determined as the user survey only recently introduced an item querying about the frequency of use.

The third type of error is *nonresponse*. These surveys rely on the cooperation of WriteToThem users and as was previously described and is usually the case for surveys not all people did participate although rates are rather good (see section C.2 Survey Response Rates). This is not a problem as long as all people are equally likely to participate and the surveyed time frame is big enough to account for variations throughout the year (e.g. the parliamentary recess in summer). It is, however, possible that certain types of users are more (or less) likely to respond to the survey which would introduce a bias in our sample and hence the results. In order to assess the bias of the sample it is possible to compare the survey responses to data on the whole population of WriteToThem users that is available from the server database. Currently this is only possible for the level of government that was contacted. The comparison is limited to the survey time frame minus two weeks (see the explanation regarding response rate). As only users who did not send a bulk message received an invitation to the survey, these messages are excluded from the sampling frame. What is more, as people could answer the survey only once, we count only the first message of a user within the sampling time frame. The results are encouraging in that even though there is a significant difference between the survey responses and the sampling frame, this difference is very small. In effect, the survey responses are largely representative of our sampling frame. What is more, we do analyse representative types separately so the actual composition of the sample in this respect is less of a problem.

Table 17: Bias of sampling frame and sample in relation to type of representative contacted

Type of representative contacted	WriteToThem overall usage based on times of use ^{a)}	WriteToThem overall usage (without bulk messages)	Sampling frame: WriteToThem first time usage ^{b)} (without bulk messages)	Survey sample	Deviation survey sample from sampling frame
Councillor	14.5%	9.8%	8.7%	7%	-1.7%
MP	67.3%	74.7%	81.6%	82.3%	+0.7%
MEP	6.1%	3.5%	1.4%	1.7%	-0.3%
Other	12.2%	12%	8.4%	9.1%	+0.7%
			$\chi^2=25.09^{**}$		
Time frame	01.05.09 to 15.02.10	01.05.09 to 15.02.10	01.05.09 to 15.02.10	15.05.09 to 28.02.10	

Source: *mySociety – WriteToThem database record; mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10*

Note: ^{a)} Bulk messages are just counted as one message.; ^{b)} Users can send multiple messages at once to all their Councillors, MEPs and Assembly Members (ie. Others) but if they choose to do so they do not obtain a questionnaire. Hence the sample is compared with all users who do send only one message at a time.

D. Detailed Survey Results and Comparative Data

Based on the Oxford Internet Survey 2009 (Dutton et al., 2009) the following table summarises the main socioeconomic indicators of a) the British population, b) British Internet users, c) those British people who said they have carried out at least one political activity within the last year and d) those people who have contacted a politician within the last year. The table also reports the respective results from the survey of WriteToThem users.

Table 18: Patterns of political participation in Britain compared to WriteToThem users

	British population	Internet users	Politically active citizens (within last year) ^{a)}	Citizens contacting a politician (within last year) ^{b)}	WriteToThem users
Source	OxIS 2009	OxIS 2009	OxIS 2009	OxIS 2009	mySociety online user survey
Number of cases ^{c)}	2,013	1,401	687	236	5,702
<i>all values as percentage of respective population</i>					
Gender				**	**/++
male	48	49	50	61	59
Education ^{d)}		**	**	**	**/++
higher education	20	27	30	41	55
Monthly gross income household		**	**	**	**/++
≤ £12,500	26	14	18	17	18
£12,501 - £40,000	58	64	58	50	43 (- £37,500)
> £40,000	16	22	24	33	39 (> £37,500)
Age		**	**	**	**/++
< 18 years	6	8	6	5	1
18-24 years	10	12	9	6	5
25-34 years	18	22	14	14	16
35-44 years	18	22	19	16	21
45-54 years	16	18	20	21	23
55-64 years	12	10	14	18	22
65-74 years	12	7	12	14	10
≥ 75 years	8	2	5	6	3
Occupation		**	**	**	**/++
employed	49	61	54	51	63
retired	23	11	23	28	19
unemployed	8	6	4	4	6
sick/disabled	3	1	3	4	4
home caretaker	8	9	6	4	4
student	9	13	10	9	5
Ethnicity				(**)	
White	93	93	93	89	93
Asian/Asian British	3	3	3	3	4
Black/Black British	3	3	4	7	3
other ethnic group	1	1	1	1	1
Disability		**			++
	15	9	15	18	14
Active in group (in last year) ^{e)}		**	**	**	**/++
no	49	43	31	23	61
a community group	40	44	47	45	24
a political group	2	2	4	3	8
both	9	11	19	29	7

Pol. participation (in last year ^{a)})		**			** ^{f)}
no activity	66	60	-	-	60
offline	19	19	56	40	7
online	4	6	13	15	17
online & offline	11	15	31	45	17

Source: Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) 2009, except „WriteToThem users“; mySociety/UK Citizens Online Democracy user survey 2009/10

Note: ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$ (based on χ^2 -test in relation to British general population); ++ $p \leq 0.01$; + $p \leq 0.05$ (based on χ^2 -test in relation to British Internet population)

^{a)} political participation was defined in the Oxford Internet Survey as signing a petition, taking part in a demonstration, deliberately buying certain products, contacting a politician, donating money to a political or civic organisation or group, contacting a political party or joining a civic organisation or association or a political party

^{b)} Based on the following question: “There are different ways of trying to improve government or help prevent things from going wrong. In the last year, have you done any of the following? Option a):Contacted a politician, government or local government official (e.g. your MP or a councillor) [...]”

^{c)} indicates number of cases in base category. Number of cases for individual items may be smaller due to nonresponse on particular variables

^{d)} excluding those respondents who are currently students except those on a postgraduate degree

^{e)} based on the following OxIS questions: for political groups: “Do you participate to the activities of: A trade union, an environmental or animal welfare organisation, any other political or campaigning organisation?”; for community groups: “Do you participate to the activities of: any social or sport club, a residents, neighbourhood, school or other local group, a charity organization or social aid organisation, religious or church organisation?”

^{f)} apart from their use of WriteToThem

E. mySociety – A Short Summary⁴⁴

mySociety is a charitable organisation and an open source community which work together to build the world's most popular and effective democracy and transparency websites. Despite directly employing only 12 people and focussing primarily on the UK, mySociety's websites were used by over 5 million people in the last year. Those citizens undertook practical, meaningful activities as varied as getting potholes fixed to delivering messages from individuals appealing against extradition from the UK. Our purpose is to deliver simple, tangible benefits for citizens, using the internet.

What we do

mySociety builds websites like [TheyWorkForYou.com](#) (parliamentary transparency) [WriteToThem.com](#) (for contacting politicians) and [FixMyStreet.com](#) (report a problem in your street to your local council).

The best way to understand what any of our websites does is to visit it: they are often single-purpose, and by trying it out, the user should immediately grasp what that purpose is.

Consequently, our sites tend to have a minimalist, unfussy feel. That reflects our obsession with making our tools as usable as possible for people who have never engaged before, never before written to a politician or never examined a voting record. Our metrics suggest we succeed at these goals, with 50% first timers being usual. This means that each year we are engaging enormous numbers of people in the UK's democratic system for the first time, fixing problems in their lives at the same time.

Everything we build is open source software. This means that our ideas and technology can be copied and re-used in democracies across the world, from the Ukraine to New Zealand. We are a virtual community with a core of a few increasingly-renowned paid developers, and a much larger group of volunteers who do everything from code entire websites to putting up posters in workplaces. Recently a group of non-technical volunteers (including one government minister) helped chop up and time-stamp 37,000 video clips of Parliament in just a few weeks. With over 2.5 million visitors expected this year, this video addition will make a real difference to showing citizens what is happening in their name in Parliament.

Why we do it

Elections in most countries happen only every few years. In between those elections there are innumerable decisions made by government that the public has a right to have a say in. mySociety believes that appropriate uses of technology can help people to engage, and to get the things changed in their society that they want changed. We are not interested in direct democracy - we're interested in patching and upgrading the democracy we've already got.

mySociety also believes that the institutions of government and civil society need help understanding quite how substantially the internet can be used to make change for the better. We therefore exist not just to build sites directly for members of the public, but we strive to help often recalcitrant institutions realise what's best for them and their users. When we succeed, the results can be spectacular - the previous Prime Minister's office commissioned us to build a petitions website that went on to become the biggest non-partisan democracy website in the history of the world (over 8 million signatures so far).

mySociety is politically neutral. It is important that everything we do is accessible to all, no matter what political allegiance. [TheyWorkForYou](#) deals with facts, not opinions.

⁴⁴

For an up-to-date version see http://docs.google.com/Doc?id=dcqnz5t5_39dzqrw2hr

History

mySociety was founded in late 2003, building on the foundations of a small volunteer community that had been around for several years prior. It was founded by Tom Steinberg, a policy analyst in the UK government who was unusually familiar with technology in having been a systems administrator prior to his policy career. He was therefore able to see that the work of this small volunteer community was more far more meaningful and empowering to most citizens than the bulk of the multi-billion pound 'eGovernment' agenda, and set about building an organisation that could replicate and accelerate their work.

That project proceeded with funding from every source possible, foundations, individuals both wealthy and not, government departments and eventually business commissions from the likes of Google, the BBC and No10 Downing Street.

By its 5th birthday, mySociety had built an international reputation as the most successful engineers of impactful non-partisan websites in the world. In 2007 the UK government asked Tom Steinberg to write its new information strategy, the Power of Information Review, and implemented almost all of the recommendations. At around the same time the then Prime Minister included a whole chapter on mySociety in his book *Britain's Everyday Heroes*.

Organisational Structure

mySociety is an open source organisation that breathes the methods it preaches. We have no offices, to help keep overheads down to extremely low levels, and organise ourselves using a variety of open source internet technologies, such as email lists, chat rooms, wikis and so on.

Around three quarters of the core of the organisation are unpaid, and a meritocratic system tends to mean that the people who do the most work end up having a larger and larger say over where the organisation goes, and what projects get worked on.

We are a registered charity in the UK, which wholly owns a company so that we can do work for organisations wanting our skills, with the profits being returned to the charity.

Future

MySociety's stated aims are to build websites that give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives; and to teach the public and voluntary sectors, through demonstration, how to use the internet most efficiently to improve lives.

Both predicate a future in which mySociety has a permanent place, always innovating, and always developing. With the future of web technologies growing at such a pace, and society shaping itself to adapt to new possibilities, providing online access to civic processes will continue to be a substantial challenge, and one that mySociety will happily rise to.

Our open source approach and agile methodology, together with our dispersed workforce, allows for some interesting possibilities, particularly when it comes to working with organisations overseas. In the past, we have not always been able to extend much assistance (beyond access to our code) to those expressing an interest in setting up similar projects abroad – not that this has stopped the launching of many comparable projects, from a Catalan FixMyStreet to a Lithuanian WriteToThem.

This state of affairs looks set to change in 2011, as for the first time we employ paid full-time staff abroad. Thanks to funding from the philanthropic Omidyar Network, two mySociety employees will be bringing the principles of TheyWorkForYou to the challenging and complicated political landscapes of Kenya and Nigeria.

Our other major project for this year will be the launch of FixMyTransport, a UK specific website which takes the principles of FixMyStreet and applies them to public transport. By providing an easy interface through which passengers can report problems with their journey, we hope to provide one more channel through which citizens have the power to make improvements in their own everyday life.

Like FixMyStreet, FixMyTransport will rely on the power of transparency and crowd-sourcing to get stuff done. You can read more about it here: <http://www.mysociety.org/fixmytransport>.

mySociety operates as an open forum, within which any member is welcome to suggest new ideas for projects. With the majority of the organisation being made up of developers who understand the availability, restrictions and above all the possibilities of open data, this can lead to innovative, and surprising, ideas. The best of those ideas - time and money allowing - get built.

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