CROWDLAW FOR CONGRESS

INTERVIEW WITH TOM SHANE

CONTENT STRATEGIST, UK HOUSE OF COMMONS

Why was there an "evidence check" on the issue of sexual harassment in schools?
Well we'd received a submission form the government departmentt of education and it was regarding the scale of the problem of sexual harassment in schools. And the government had insisted that this was affecting maybe around 5 percent of the schools and from what we'd been hearing it seemed like that wasn't the case at all and it was actually much more widespread than this. And so while we could've made that claim ourselves, we wanted to hear from groups of people that could come together and collectively bring their experience to hand to help us understand whether even the statistics that were being published were accurate, whether their lived experience suggested that it was even more widespread than that.

What was the advantage of adding a digital engagement element to the evidence check?
Creating a digital environment meant that almost instantaneously we could hear from a much more diverse group of people. And we could hear from teachers, we could hear from charities, we heard from a CEO of a charity, we heard from Girls Guiding, which is a kind of scouts community for girls, we heard from some academics, some PhD researchers. So we had a very wide pool of people with different kinds of expertise to bring to account. And they provided very thoughtful and well researched and evidence-based responses. It's easy to think of digital engagement as involving mass participation with low investment and perhaps low levels of knowledge and expertise. And I think that what we did here was we heard from a smaller group of people and we weren't looking to hear from thousands of people like you might think of Twitter or Facebook being able to offer. We were looking to hear from a small community of people and as a result, the responses were really high quality and they were very specific, very focused.

Was the outcome what you expected?
I think what surprised me was just how useful it was and also the government's response to it. You know you can do these kinds of experiments and you want them to have impact but it's a bit precarious if you don't know what's going to happen. In this case the

government responded by retracting, rescinding the initial submission. So the govt obviously had placed quite a lot of weight on this. And so I think those two things, it was the shear quality of the responses that were received and how seriously the government ended up taking it.

How complicated was the technology you used?
Essentially, the technology was very very simple, quite old. What we were doing was much more based around a well thought out process and a process that was actually linked into a parliamentary process, and technologically I think that it has lots of potential with very limited means if the process itself is well thought out.

What Made it Successful?
The key issue is that the public engagement had a real purpose. It wasn't because somebody wanted to do it for its own sake, though that is a very valid and reasonable thing to do, the reason it worked--and in my opinion when public engagement works best--is because there is a need and a desire from both sides, the people who want to listen and the people who want to speak, and that they can come together in a really productive way.

What advice do you have for people thinking about a process like this?
Have faith in the ability of your citizens to help you and I think when it comes to digital engagement, as I was saying earlier, it's very easy to get nervous about how people will respond; maybe they won't respond at all, maybe too many people respond, maybe they won't have anything helpful to say, maybe you're going to be stuck with thousands of comments and what are you going to do with them. It's easy to conceptualize engagement in that way. Where the potential lies is hearing from people who have exceptionally valuable things to contribute and are going to make your life easier and are going to help you push forward your agenda, and help you do your job which is, in government, make good policy, make good laws; and, in parliament, scrutinize those processes. The reason you should do it is because it's going to be good for you, it's going to help you do what you're trying to do.