

Defining Dialogue: The Digital Voice of the People's House

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Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me.

Nearly nine years ago, I had the privileged opportunity of being one of the first human-centered designers asked to examine legislative drafting, one of Congress's most intricate processes. Alongside House staff, civil society experts, natural language experts, and legislative technologists, I helped develop recommendations, build systems, and bring modernization work to life. That experience shaped how I think about public access, institutional trust, and the digital future of Congress. Others will address what is being done and what can be done. I would like to focus on where this work can go and the big ideas that can inform the north star.

1. Establishing Shared Definitions for the Public, Data, Information, and Access

One lesson I learned while working with the House Office of the Legislative Counsel was the meaning of "accuracy." Accuracy can mean both "factually accurate" and "accurately written": one refers to factual correctness, and the other to conveying the intended meaning.

This hearing's subject invites both narrow and broad readings, so I will define "the public," "data and information," and "access" according to my own interpretation. By "the public," I mean the people this institution serves: individual constituents, the civil society organizations and legal and legislative experts who work on their behalf, and the private companies that turn the raw record of Congress into tools people use.

I name companies deliberately. They are not the audience; the people are. But companies often act as intermediaries, and today they do much of the work of making legislative data legible. That can pull attention away from the public purpose because intermediary needs are often easier to identify and meet than the needs of people themselves.

I define "data and information" in both inside-out and outside-in terms. Inside-out information is what the House produces: bills, amendments, votes, schedules, committee proceedings, and the surrounding documents. The institution's daily operations produce that record as a byproduct, and it rarely arrives in a form the public can use. Outside-in information is what Congress receives: feedback, complaints, requests, and inquiries. The House is the only institution in government with the fundamental task of continual dialogue with the people.

By "access," I mean availability, usability, and awareness. Information that exists but is unknown to the public is functionally inaccessible. A document posted in a format no one can search, cite, or understand may be technically available, but it is not truly accessible. The outcome of accessibility is shared understanding: information the public can comprehend and use. By that definition, this discussion runs from data standards to the platforms and tools that sit on them, and to the policy governing all of it.

1. Principle A: Unequal Digital Representation

Most Americans will never visit a Congressional building. For most, the websites are the building: where they go to reach representatives, understand Congress, and navigate the federal government. As the country approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, Congress should consider what representation and engagement require in a nation of 50 states and more than 300 million people.

Our government should be representative, but reactive congressional information systems contribute to unequal digital representation. Most Americans have no practical way to see how Congress represents their interests or where to find themselves in the thousands of meetings, votes, hearings, and actions the House takes each year. Uneven, member-by-member technology investments create unequal experiences of responsiveness and clarity depending on staffing, priorities, and budgets. Generally speaking:

- Member websites are not permanently kept, standardized, or even expected to be fully objective. Likely, manually updated with no automated tools of guidance.
- Constituent engagement software has unequal investment and maturity of use by each member.

- Legislative interpretation software is often behind paywalls, giving staffers, lobbying firms, interest groups, and civil society organizations different levels of access to the same public data.
- In-house tools lack adequate funding for training to keep up with demand or stay ahead of technical debt.

Even professionals who spend their careers navigating this maze can get lost. They patch together workarounds where gaps exist or wait for private technology companies' roadmaps to define what will be possible next.

2. Principle B: Digital Transformation Requires Digital Dialogue

Modernizing congress.gov and house.gov is not merely a website project. It is the work of architecting the People's House for digital dialogue. A website waits to be visited. A voice travels. It carries principles beyond the website to the places where public dialogue already happens: search engines, AI assistants, Reddit, Discord, comment sections, and other civic spaces. The House should not leave authoritative truth buried on a page waiting to be found.

Institutions used to write information and then distribute it; today machines generate it on demand, draw it from sources of uneven reliability, and deliver it as if it were settled. For any institution whose authority depends on being believed, that is not only an engineering problem but a veracity problem. It raises a direct question: how does Congress represent the truth it alone is responsible for, the law it writes and the record of what it did?

- Publishing Office sites are currently organized around organizational charts rather than user needs.
 - *Consider: Why is it hard to find the whole context of any given information on the websites?*
- The House lacks visibility into visitor intent, forcing diverse users like educators and journalists to navigate the same undifferentiated complexity.
- User research must expand beyond current audiences to find new use-cases and possibilities.
 - *Consider: The biases of basing future state on the past state*
- A lack of a usable temporal model makes it difficult for the public to distinguish between current law, prior versions, and new drafts.
 - *Consider: The UK successfully implements versioning that allows users to move through legislative history.*
 - *While the U.S. has more bills, the principle of achievable versioning still holds.*
- Lack of governance on the use of authoritative text creates unnecessary back-and-forth in policymaking, but also public usage of the data beyond the website.
 - *Consider: The House must ensure digital assistants can accurately cite authoritative data.*
 - *If the People's House is unintelligible, the public will turn to less reliable external sources for information.*

3. Principle C: Awareness Should Lead to Action

The technology gap between awareness and action is enormous. As an example, consider two common public journeys, “owned,” by different parts of the House:

A. Understanding A Bill – (To be aware)

Someone hears about a bill that affects them and goes to congress.gov to read it. Within a few clicks, they are lost:

- They cannot tell whether they are looking at current law, a prior version, or a draft.
- Nothing shows them what the bill would change in existing law.
- They will never be able to use any dates, information, reports or hearings from a primary source.
- They leave without an answer and are less likely to return.

B. Following an issue or seeking help- (To act)

Someone is concerned about a program, law, or request that affects them.

- They must go to their member’s website to see what that member has done.
- They may not know when the last hearing, conversation, or testimony occurred, or that relevant reports may exist.
- They may not think to visit the House or congress.gov because those resources do not appear designed for the average person.

A persistent person might track down a member website or phone number and leave a message. But chance often determines whether they receive a response, a confirmation, or any signal at all. This happens every day to people who came to their government for a plain answer and did not get one. Dialogue is sometimes confirmation and does not have to be a conversation.

4. Principle D: The North Star of Digital Democracy

Without a clear north star, modernization can collapse into surface improvements: new colors, a cleaner banner, personas, or a better search box. Those may help, but they are not enough. Traditional UX measures ask whether a person completed a task efficiently. For one, a democratic digital experience must ask whether the person left clearer, more confident, and more connected.

In a true experience-led transformation, individual constituents and legal experts alike should be able to visit the digital People’s House and leave with:

- **Clarity:** They understand the information they came to find.

- **Confidence:** They know what to do next and trust that the House has heard them.
- **Connection:** They are equipped to engage with and participate in their government.

Consider: Large language models can shape each interaction to a person's need, literacy level, and purpose—but only if the underlying information is authoritative, structured, and governed. Today, the online House too often feels like a marble hall with no one at the desk: impressive, official, and hard to navigate.

A shared north star can turn every dollar, feature, and investment toward greater engagement, trust, and innovation.

5. Theory to Practice: Content to Conversation

We've democratized publishing, we've moved services online, and we now are at the beginning of democratizing one of our most uniquely human capabilities — dialogue. In an era of confident misinformation, that gap is a real vulnerability: when no one can confirm what is authoritative, a less reliable version fills the space.

A better website is necessary, but no longer sufficient. Today, the real question is whether an electronic assistant, asked what the House did on a bill, draws from Congress and cites Congress accurately. Tomorrow, the question may be whether an agent can facilitate the transaction on behalf of either side of the dialogue.

As of 2026, a large share of Google searches, by several estimates more than half, end without anyone clicking through to a website, increasingly because the page generates the answer directly. Google's AI Overviews, the generated summaries shown above the links, already reach more than a billion people a month, and dedicated AI answer engines resolve many queries without sending anyone onward. We have not yet made the investments to be that top source. In the private sector, this is now called generative engine optimization: making sure authoritative information is structured so AI systems can find, trust, and cite it.

Concrete, solvable content problems are the gap between today and the future state of conversation.

6. Acknowledge and Prevent Gridlock in Transformation

Technology is often expected to overcome system-centric silos by itself. It cannot. Before undertaking this work, the House should establish conflict-resolution plans for recurring transformation challenges:

- Digitization can replicate complexity instead of resolving it.

- When human judgment remains the bottleneck, digitization can increase volume without improving resolution.
- Constituent-message volume is already immense. Recent estimates put congressional offices at 50 to 80 million messages a year, with some House offices receiving more than 180,000. The trend matters more than the exact total: one district rose from about 9,400 messages in 2001 to roughly 123,000 by 2017.
- Design work can reveal tensions that technologists lack the authority, sponsorship, or change-management support to resolve.
- Risk aversion, inconsistent security interpretations, and slow decisions can stall collaboration.
- Unclear ownership of websites, domains, and systems can trap data and information in stalemate.

A consumer brand can establish a presence on a platform such as Discord or Reddit and answer questions in its own voice, in real time, wherever its customers are talking. There is no reason the authoritative account of what Congress is doing cannot do the same: accurately, verifiably, and in plain language, including inside AI assistants, Discord, Reddit, or the comment section of a page—wherever people ask first. This is cheaper and faster to build than at any point in history. The missing piece is the decision to do it.

7. Examples of Principles Translated

None of this is hypothetical, and people with a fraction of the House's resources have built prototypes and platforms. One free service monitors the House floor schedule and turns every bill into a plain, sourced brief, with a verification guide that points to exact pages and lines, fast enough that people can act before a vote rather than after. A widely downloaded app lets anyone ask a plain-English question about any bill, in any state or in Congress, and get a readable, neutral answer. If a handful of volunteers can build these for free, the institution that owns the source material can meet the bar and become the source these tools cite.

The building blocks are just as proven. On legibility, Maryland now requires ballot questions in language a sixth-grade reader can understand, and the federal Plain Writing Act of 2010 set that expectation for agencies, though it left legislative text out. On design, the model already exists at scale: the United Kingdom consolidated hundreds of separate agency sites into one organized around what people need to do, which made it much easier to use, and closer to home the Department of Veterans Affairs rebuilt VA.gov around veterans' real tasks rather than its own org chart. On listening, structured deliberation already works in Taiwan, the vTaiwan process used an open online platform that let citizens weigh in and see one another's views, which surfaced a representative range of opinion rather than the loudest voice, with elected officials still making the decision.

On the institutional voice itself, the European Parliament offers an example some of you have seen firsthand: it funds a dedicated, non-political capacity whose only job is to make the institution legible and trusted across many audiences and languages. Our traditions differ, and I am not suggesting we copy another system, but the principle travels. Congress has nothing comparable, no central, authoritative "this is Congress, and here is what is true" presence. In an

era of impersonation, scams, and confident misinformation, that capacity is a matter of legitimacy, not vanity. The United Kingdom and France invest heavily in trustworthy government identity for this reason, and our own most respected brands, NASA and the Park Service, show that legitimacy and clarity can travel together.

These examples are a state plain-language rule, a startup app, a national deliberation process, a foreign parliament. Their principle matters more than their size, and the House commands resources their builders never had.

8. Recommendations

I respectfully offer recommendations based on design thinking principles, all pursuable on a strictly nonpartisan, institutional basis.

A. Empathize: How do we listen and speak to the Public?

- a. Assess public perception. Brand, experience, voice, and tone exist whether they are deliberate or not.
- b. Commission a public perception and branding study. Study how the public recognizes and understands the House's digital presence.
- c. Establish a baseline. Use the findings to measure whether future modernization improves trust, recognition, clarity, and confidence.
- d. Create feedback loops. Establish ways to gather, incorporate, and measure public feedback over time.
- e. Build a testing coalition. Recruit public and internal testers who reflect the range of ages, backgrounds, abilities, and digital fluency levels the House serves.
- f. Co-design with stakeholders. Inclusive co-design, as with the Comparative Print Suite, creates stronger outcomes and accelerates adoption and buy-in.

B. Define : What should the Digital House be?

- a. Question to ask and outcome: What should the Digital People's House be?
- b. Map audiences, content, journeys, and outcomes. Before redesigning pages or procuring tools, establish a shared inventory of:
- c. Who the House serves, including constituents, educators, journalists, civil society groups, legal and legislative professionals, congressional staff, and technology intermediaries;
- d. What information those audiences need and where it currently lives;
- e. Which public journeys matter most, including understanding a bill, finding current law, following committee action, contacting a representative, tracking a request, and knowing what happens next; and
- f. What successful engagement should look like.
- g. Define shared constituent-dialogue standards. Inventory shared constituent-dialogue processes and identify common services and standards for response.
- h. Give offices a common onboarding path and clear standards for acknowledging and answering public input, so individual offices do not have to create separate, inconsistent processes.
- i. Use this consistency to advance outstanding recommendations on member-constituent and committee-constituent dialogue.

C. Ideate: What have we not yet imagined?

- a. Crowdsource innovation. Run hackathons, prototypes, scholarships, and prizes that ask people what they want the People's House to be and help the House understand what the public needs. Do not innovate in isolation from the public.
- b. Prepare for generative discovery. Investigate generative engine optimization and set guidelines for responsible experimentation, so the House becomes the source digital assistants draw from and cite.

D. Prototype: What is the journey?

- a. Clarify the temporal model. Users should be able to tell whether they are looking at current law, a current draft, a prior version, or the latest action—and what happens next.
- b. Map the congressional process around each journey, including related documents, actions, deadlines, and decision points.
- c. Allow users to enter from any starting point and understand where information came from, why it matters, what action is available, and what step follows.

E. Test

- a. Question to ask and Outcome: How do we measure success, and who should be accountable?
- b. Define ownership and accountability to enable measurement and progress
- c. Put the work in front of the coalition, and measure what changed.
- d. Test each prototype with the coalition as it is built, not after.
- e. E.G. Measure the redesign against the perception baseline from the branding study and judge it by whether people leave with more clarity, more confidence, and more connection than before.

9. Closing

The Framers built the House to stay close to the people. Our task is to keep that closeness as the House moves from marble to glass, from a building most Americans will never enter to a screen nearly all of them carry. I will leave you with the question I most want this Subcommittee to answer: what is the digital voice of the People's House, and who is responsible for it? Answer it well, and someone in Portland, Oregon, or Portland, Maine, and every district in between, can come to the People's House online and leave better informed and more engaged than they arrived.

Appendix: A General Note on Government UX

In government, the best user experience is often the one a person never has to notice. Most people do not seek out government services; they encounter them at consequential moments involving travel, school, retirement, death, illness, or financial distress.

That is not an argument against building or buying software. It is a reminder that the best technology is seamless and, ideally, invisible. Good technology is easy to navigate; excellent technology does not need directions. In an era of AI and agentic systems, when people ask full questions and often avoid websites altogether, this matters even more.

The measure of successful digital transformation in government is often subtractive, not additive: what did the user no longer have to do?

Thank you. I look forward to your questions and ongoing collaboration.

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