



## Parliaments in the Digital Age



The workshop 'Parliaments in the Digital Age' was hosted at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) (University of Oxford) in June 2007, with the aim of bringing three communities of experts together: parliamentary officials, academics from the Internet studies field and academics from the legislative studies field. This is a collection of the papers presented as part of the day's discussions.

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## Introduction

Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Stephen Ward

The workshop *Parliaments in the Digital Age* was hosted at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) in June 2007 with the aim of bringing three communities of experts together: parliamentary officials, academics from the Internet studies field and academics from the legislative studies field. It also aimed to have a representation of different countries and parliaments with varying institutional characteristics. The workshop included both substantive sessions where papers were presented and working sessions with roundtable discussions. This format allowed for a very productive workshop that has resulted in this publication. The workshop was co-organised by the Centre for Legislative Studies, University of Hull, and the OII, and co-sponsored by the British Academy and the ESRC's e-society programme.

### **Workshop objectives**

The workshop set out four objectives:

Firstly, to encourage an integrated perspective over the study of the relationship between parliament and the Internet. This is an area of study in its infancy but in rapid expansion. The Internet studies community have dedicated some time to this issue, having produced valuable studies on the topic. However, these studies do not take into full account the institutional differences between parliaments—something to which the legislative studies can contribute. Hence the idea to bring the two communities of scholars together: Internet and legislative studies. The legislative studies community itself has not looked at this issue, leaving the 'Internet' field to the competence of 'Internet experts'. Parliamentary officials, on the other hand, have themselves invested considerable time in considering the issue of the Internet, having contributed to significant developments in this area. However, many of these studies are focused on detail or technical developments, rather than the overall picture in terms of the impact of the Internet on parliament. What is more, there has been little communication between parliamentary officials and academics. By bringing these three communities of experts together the workshop was able to develop an integrated view over the issues associated with the use of the Internet by parliaments.

Secondly, to foster a comparative perspective on the topic. There is a lack of comparative studies in this area, partly due to the infancy of this area of research. The most detailed comparative studies in this area on the other hand have focused mainly on the 'usual suspects', typically Anglo-Saxon countries and Northern Europe. The comparative perspective is particularly important in supporting the integrated perspective mentioned above. By looking at different institutional contexts, one is able to understand better the extent to which the Internet has brought any differences to parliamentary practice; as well as to understand the different ways parliaments have used the Internet. The workshop brought together experts from different countries and focused in particular on six parliaments (British, Dutch, French Senate, Portuguese, Slovenian and Scottish), each represented by both parliamentary officials and academics. These six parliaments allowed for the combination of different institutional characteristics such as method of election, democratic history, size of parliament, age of parliament and parliament role.

Thirdly, to determine the gaps in the current research to be able to identify a research agenda for the future. The presence of representatives of three communities of experts fostered a fruitful discussion about the key areas of research that need further developing. It also provided for an ideal setting to identify the key factors that need further investigation and which may not have been part of previous studies. The workshop aimed to provide for the development of new ideas that may lead to new lines of research and new networks of collaboration between academics and parliamentary officials.

Fourthly, to produce a publication which provides a summary of the state of the art of the research in this area, suggests new lines of research and illustrates the specific cases of six parliaments. The subsequent chapters do exactly this. The case studies chapters were written by parliamentary officials with responsibilities in the area of implementation of the Internet, providing therefore for a unique insight.

## Parliaments Online: Modernizing and Engaging?

Mary Francoli

During the last decade a growing body of literature has emerged that examines information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their impact on parliaments, or 'parliaments in the digital age'. Some of the analysis takes a public administration perspective and some takes a broader democratic governance perspective. Much of this stems from concern over declining levels of voter turnout and rising levels of cynicism and distrust on the part of the public toward both politicians and political institutions (Lusoli et al., 2006). This article surveys the literature in an effort to shed light on how parliaments use ICTs, such as the Internet, and, the impact of such use. For example, has it led to greater transparency and accountability? Has it permitted individual citizens to have greater influence over the decision-making process? And has it strengthened the role of parliaments as guardians of good governance and democracy? Examples of existing practices from parliaments, such as those in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, will be provided and gaps in the literature and issues for future discussion will be identified.

To start, though, the concept of 'parliaments in the digital age' needs to be broken down. There are numerous ways of looking at parliament; some emphasize the institution as a whole, others emphasize individual parliamentarians. With this distinction in mind, the existing literature can be divided into two broad categories. The first focuses primarily on modernization and the notion of e-government. The second looks at new methods for engagement, or e-democracy. This article considers each category in turn as they apply to parliaments as a whole, and to individual MPs. It is useful to note that there is a potential third category that some might include: e-campaigning. It has received a lot of attention in the literature (Bimber, 2003; Ward and Gibson, 2003; Kluver, Jankowski, Foot and Schneider eds, 2007). However, due to limitations of length and clarity, this article emphasizes the impact of ICTs on the daily functions of parliaments and elected MPs.

### **Modernization / E-Government**

A number of studies have detailed the rise of e-government (Chadwick, 2006; Jaeger, 2003). Much of the literature focuses primarily on the bureaucracy with a cursory mention of parliament. However, the process of modernization and change inherent in the e-government literature does help us to understand the impact of the Internet on parliaments as institutions and on the new media strategies of individual MPs. Such works discuss the development of an online presence, evolving from actors simply posting as much information as possible on the Internet, to a more refined effort offering services and interactive features. As Chadwick (2006: 179) notes, such an online presence:

if implemented properly, can improve current government services, increase accountability, result in more accurate and efficient delivery of services, reduce administrative costs and time spent on repetitive tasks for government employees, facilitate greater transparency in the administration of government, and allow greater access to services due to around the clock availability of the Internet.

Like government departments and agencies, parliaments have definitely been going online. The Inter-Parliamentary Union has put together a directory of websites for national legislatures in over 180 countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union). Parliaments in places as diverse as Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, the UK, and Zimbabwe, all offer online information about the institution, work done in committees, as well as bills being considered. In many cases, full reports can be downloaded and Hansard is readily available. Some offer video and audio feeds so the public can watch proceedings online, and most offer contact information for partisan and non-partisan parliamentary actors. These changes are driven, in part, by a desire to be seen as more transparent, arguably making representatives more accountable to the public.

Other modernization efforts, including infrastructural programs, which improve access, broadcasting and security, can facilitate the working lives of those toiling within parliaments. In Canada, for example, the House of Commons is wired so that every MP has access to a power source and a connection to the parliamentary Intranet and the Internet. In addition, a portal was set up on the parliamentary Intranet allowing representatives to file 'notices of motions' and 'written questions' electronically (Kernaghan, 2007: 229).

The ability to vote electronically has also been implemented in some parliaments, such as Finland; its pros and cons have been heavily debated. This debate is far from new. For example, as far back as the late 1800s, Members of the US Congress discussed, and ultimately decided against, adopting an automatic vote recorder demonstrated by Edison. They thought it "an enemy of minorities who deliberately attempt to gain advantage by changing votes or filibustering legislation" (Wilhelm, 2000: 1). However, it has also been lauded for its timesaving potential.

In addition to these larger, institutional developments, there have been many changes to the way individual representatives conduct their business. Today, MPs have access to a wide range of technologies, including telephones, faxes, email, mobiles, and the ever popular BlackBerry, or PDA. Rules governing the use of such devices in the Chamber differ from parliament to parliament. Canadian MPs, for example, can use BlackBerries and laptops in the House of Commons, whereas the use of mobile phones is heavily frowned upon. In other parliaments, no electronic devices are permitted in the chamber. However, outside the Chamber they do help to connect MPs to staff, and staff to one another, and to essential offices, such as the party leader's and the whip's. Information is also made more readily available to the media. Arguably, such contacts have the potential to increase office efficiency.

ICTs also help MPs maintain good communication with their constituency. For those with ridings in large geographical areas, such as Canada or Australia, it can be difficult to make weekly visits and a good connection between an MPs' parliamentary office and their constituency office, or offices as the case may be, is vital.

ICTs can also help MPs in their role as liaison between their constituents and the government at large. While little attention has been given to the way that technology changes the nature of interaction between representatives and the bureaucracy, there is evidence of its significance (Malloy, 2003). The increased visibility of MPs as a result of websites and the publishing of email addresses and fax numbers means they are receiving vast amounts of correspondence, much of which is from constituents looking for help navigating their way through various government services. However, such ease of contact has meant MPs now have to manage increased expectations. Because constituents can send messages instantly, they often expect to receive an acknowledgement as quickly and are surprised and upset if their concern is not dealt with in a matter of days. Such expectations differ from

those in touch by post, cognizant of the time it takes for a letter to be delivered, sorted, opened, and enquiries made before a response is provided. On the other hand though, ICTs can help MPs to live up to increased expectations, by facilitating a better link with public servants. Moreover, information-rich online portals mean MPs' staff can often find answers to queries relatively quickly. In this case, "the advantages of rapid communication, and particularly for the secure and rapid transfer of complex information and documents between constituents, legislators and public servants, could create a dramatically increased role for legislators in the delivery of public services" (Malloy, 2003).

## **Engagement / E-Democracy**

A great deal of the literature on parliaments and technology has focused on e-democracy. Indeed, ICTs have long been heralded for their democratic potential and are seen as a means of re-engaging or re-connecting the electorate with their representatives and improving the health of modern democracies. Politicians have difficulty containing their enthusiasm for ICTs. In Canada, former Prime Minister Paul Martin often spoke about the need to bring the public into the decision making process, arguing ICTs were a means to that end (Martin, 2003). In the UK, Tony Blair has said "...innovative new media is pioneering new ways of involving people of all ages and backgrounds in citizenship through new Internet and digital technology...that can only strengthen democracy" (Hansard Society). Such optimistic rhetoric has coincided with a policy environment that tends to be supportive of technology. There have been a number of efforts to bridge the digital divide, and to ensure all citizens have some sort of access to the Internet whether they live in urban or more rural and remote areas.

Such excitement over the potential of ICTs is also easily identified in the wider literature on technology and politics. Some have gone so far as to question the need for representative democracy in a time when information and communication can flow so freely (Naisbitt, 1982). Others are more measured in their praise, but still contend that a modern society necessitates greater public consultation, which can be provided by ICTs (Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002). And, to a certain extent, parliaments have embraced this idea and have been experimenting with online consultations. The online consultations on the UK Draft Communications Bill in 2002 are a good example (Chadwick, 2006; Chadwick and May, 2003; Coleman 2004). Committee members discussing the bill were given summaries of debate occurring on the online forum set up for the purpose. The site received close to 2,000 hits per day and over 200 comments were made.

While such consultations are innovative, they present some challenges. Parliamentary actors seem unsure of how to cope with and use the input received at times. Some studies have alluded to an inherent difficulty in discerning and summarizing the ideas, values and suggestions contained in the electronic dialogue, which can result in "a scattered cluster of priorities and opinions" (Hurrell, 2004). Offering e-consultations without incorporating discussions into the wider policy process can have serious consequences. As Coleman and Gøtze (2001) warn: "governments should not offer online consultation as a gimmick; they must be committed to integrating evidence gathered into the policy process and being responsive." Failing to use the evidence gathered has the potential to discourage participation from future consultations and to exacerbate feelings of cynicism and distrust.

Other efforts to engage the public are not as deliberative. Some parliaments offer the public the option of submitting petitions online. In the UK, for example this is done via the Prime Minister's website. Here, interested persons can sign a petition, but there is no supporting documentation provided, or space for discussion. However, it has generated significant activity. Since its creation in November of 2006, it has attracted over two million unique signers (E-petitions).

Such experiments, while important to recognize, have not been as extensive as many techno-enthusiasts would like. Some have suggested that such electronic engagement is better suited to the bureaucracy, a more stable institution free of the concerns of popularity and campaigning (Borins, Kernaghan, Brown, Bontis, Perri 6, and Thompson, 2007).

The use of ICTs for wider citizen engagement by individual representatives somewhat mirrors the situation found in many parliaments. While most representatives now have an online presence in the form of a website, we are really just starting to see the incorporation of interactive features, such as polls, surveys, and blogs. Studies from the UK have shown that only about eight per cent of sites offer such features (Ward and Lusoli, 2005) and evidence from other parliamentary democracies, such as Canada, have shown similar trends (Francoli, 2007).

This is not to say that MPs are not dealing with the issue of engagement via outside pressure. While this article has focused primarily on the use of ICTs from within parliament, it is important to note that many individuals and groups are seeking to engage, or contact actors within parliament whether or not these actors solicit such communication or not. A growing body of literature on 'cyberactivism' highlights such attempts (Cleaver, 1998; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). This is significant, as such use of ICTs have presented MPs with a challenge, adding to already high levels of correspondence.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

While ICTs have clearly been adopted by both parliamentary institutions and individual MPs, to varying degrees, there are some institutional factors which impact the success and extent of uptake. Often such factors receive little attention in the literature; however, former British MP Richard Allan carefully outlines some of the constraints (2006). As he points out, MPs control their own offices, and uptake of technology is typically at their discretion. In such cases, it can fall by the wayside unless a particularly tech-savvy employee pushes its value. At the institutional level, innovation can be slow if it cannot be offered to all MPs (Allan, 2006). Arguably, MPs are also somewhat reluctant to embrace ICTs as they are not completely sure how wider citizen engagement coalesces with their elected, geographically bound positions. In spite of the enthusiasm that some MPs have shown, some have qualified their hope by reinforcing the importance of their role. As one Canadian MP stated: "it must not replace the need for considered judgment by MPs" (personal interview with author).

Uptake may also be stifled by a simple sense of insecurity about the wants and needs of the public. It can be difficult for agents of parliament to know exactly what the public wants when it comes to the use of ICTs. Stephen Coleman's early survey in the UK showed that generally people want their MP to have a website and want the option of being able to contact them via email. However, generally this is an area that has received little attention and such studies can be a challenge.

Along with the adoption of ICTs come many worries and some argue that the adoption of ICTs are not a cause for such optimism. Rather, it is 'politics as usual' as the online world simply mirrors the offline environment (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Others still are much more skeptical and warn of the adverse effects that ICTs may bring. Rather than serving as a solution to problems such as space, population, access and participation, ICTs may "further alienate people from themselves and from others" (Saco: xvi).

Concern is also raised about the speed of ICTs. Benjamin Barber (2001) for example, has questioned whether speed is suited to, or appropriate for, democratic deliberation. This sentiment is mirrored in the work of Taylor and Saarinen (1996: 6) who worry about its impact on negotiation:

If politics is the art of negotiation, speed is the death of the political. Negotiation takes time...negotiation and deliberate decision become impossible. Speed privileges certainty and assertion...it is not possible to slow down long enough to all for uncertainty and questions.

Beyond speed, there is also a worry over a risk of elitism where those willing to use ICTs are few and tend to be the already engaged, leaving the disengaged to be further marginalized from the political process (Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002).

While political actors are often criticized for not embracing ICTs quickly enough, the steps taken toward modernization and engagement should be recognized. As noted above, there are areas which certainly warrant further research and many questions that deserve further discussion. Does political culture play a role? It is often neglected when considering the uptake of ICTs and the lack of apparent radical change. Canadians, for example, tend to prefer slow, incremental change which makes a sudden move toward politics online difficult (Paquet, 2001). However, recognizing this, the prospects for long-term change might be seen as more encouraging. Is such change desirable? Will citizenship depend on being 'e-savvy'? Are line departments better suited to engaging the public? If so, what is the relevance or role of parliaments in the digital age?

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## Parliaments and the Internet: A Perspective on the State of Research

Thomas Zittel

### **A Dominant (Normative) Frame of Reference**

The Internet is the most recent and the most innovative means of mass communication. Its implications for the parliamentary sphere are in turn largely debated on the basis of established normative concepts of democracy. It is predominantly framed as a means to foster a more participatory type of democracy by increasing the *responsiveness* of parliamentary decision making and the *transparency* of the parliamentary process. Stephen Coleman's (2001: 5) following scenario illustrates this point.

Elected Representatives will take the opportunity to connect directly with citizens now that every politician can have the means to distribute unmediated messages at low cost. Email will be used extensively and there will be filtering software so that messages from constituents can have priority over those from lobbyists. More MP's will begin to conduct cyber-surgeries, allowing their constituents as well as local interest groups to meet with them via video-conferences.

At the conceptual level, such normative scenarios are related to the broader notion of e-democracy (Arterton 1987). This concept subsumes three distinct levels of analysis that need to be kept apart from each other also with regard to the parliamentary realm (Zittel 2004). The concept of e-democracy firstly suggests that the Internet will be able to intensify the quantity and quality of communication between parliament and constituents within a given institutional frame; e-democracy secondly suggests that e-communication will affect parliament as an institution; e-democracy thirdly suggests that a more responsive and transparent parliamentary process will eventually increase the political engagement of citizens.

### **More Transparency and Responsiveness with the Internet?**

We still know little to nothing about the relevance of the Internet for the political behaviour of constituents and for parliament as an institution. Current research however has accumulated a larger body of evidence on the usage of the Internet in the parliamentary sphere for the purpose of e-communication. This research allows for three main conclusions on the medium's impact on the responsiveness and transparency of parliaments.

The first conclusion is that parliaments are increasingly using the Internet as a means to facilitate access to public information and to increase transparency within the existing institutional framework. Norris (2001) counted in mid 2000 national parliaments in 98 countries with websites (out of 189 UN member states). Today this number has increased significantly with national parliaments in 188 countries publishing a websites (out of 192 UN member states).

The increasing quality of parliamentary websites also suggests improvements in the transparency of the parliamentary process. Norris (2001) measures the quality of information on a parliamentary website with an information index ranging from 0 to

100. The index looks at the existence of seven key items such as the calendar of parliamentary business or the status of pending legislation. Norris's results demonstrate that legislatures in established democracies were far from perfect in mid 2000. The mean information index for Scandinavian countries for example scored only 53 percent, meaning that on average not more than half of the coded items were available on the websites. A later study of Trechsel et al. (2003) indicates a visible development in the quality of parliamentary websites over time. Their information index shows for example that Scandinavian parliaments have caught up in significant degrees with a mean information index of around 75 percent for Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

The timeliness of access is a crucial factor defining transparency. Some parliaments are pushing hard to improve the provision of *real time information* via the Internet. In the German case there are three types of information that point to this direction: The parliamentary agenda is firstly published ahead of time; the website of the Bundestag secondly provides preliminary versions of floor minutes at the very same day the debate took place and before the official and corrected transcripts become available; floor proceedings and public proceedings of the committees are thirdly broadcasted via Web-TV and audio streaming. However, this is only case-specific evidence and we lack comparative evidence on this aspect of transparency.

The available literature on parliaments and the Internet allows for the following second conclusion: Many MPs use the Internet for constituency communication but they do so in very cautious ways. My own research shows for the German Bundestag and the Swedish Riksdag increases in the share of personal websites from 30 and 27 percent in April 2000 to 88 (80) and 70 (50) Percent in April 2004. In the US House of Representatives, personal websites were already a common means of constituency communication in 2000 with 98 percent of MPs using a personal website (Zittel 2003, 2007). In the UK we see a similar increase from 28 to 70 (42) percent (Halstead 2002; Ward and Lusoli 2005).

The usage of websites does not tell us anything about the quality of e-communication. My findings demonstrate that the quality of information on personal websites increases over time in the German Bundestag, the Swedish Riksdag and the US House. More and more MPs publish position papers, newsletters or information on their parliamentary activities on their personal websites. But quality is still a far cry from being perfect, particularly in the Bundestag and the Riksdag. In these two parliaments, the majority of MPs still publish digital brochures on the net or use the net for the narrow purposes of political advertisement or public relations. Press releases, general text messages and photos remain the main pieces of content in these cases. In the Swedish Riksdag text materials are often supplied and controlled by the party organization and are not issued by the individual MP at all.

Personal websites are also deficient in terms of interactivity. I am working in my study with an interactivity index ranging from 0 to 2 (Zittel 2003, 2007). It is based upon the coding of 5 different interactive applications that are either coded as present or not present. The index distinguishes between MPs who have no website or websites with no interactive application (0), MPs who publish websites with applications for private forms of interaction such as email or webmail (1) and MPs who keep websites with public forms of interaction such as discussion fora or online surveys (2). My findings show that all personal websites across all parliaments show a very low level of interactivity and that we see in contrast to usage and the quality of information not much change over time in this respect. In the US House, the level of interactivity even decreases over time. This finding is consistent with similar findings for the UK reported by Jackson and Lilleker (2004) and Lusoli and Ward (2005).

A glance at the literature suggests the following third conclusion: few Parliaments use the WWW to connect citizens to the decision-making process and they do so in hesitant ways. The most visible experiments in this regard are 16 online consultations that took place in the House of Commons between 1998 and 2005. Most of these consultations allowed ordinary citizens to voice their interests and experiences regarding a specific piece of pending legislation and to deliberate with each other on this specific matter (Trenel 2004; Coleman 2004).

The German Bundestag is also using a variety of interactive measures. It conducted one online consultation in December 2004 on the Future of the Bundestag's website. This consultation differed in its format from the British cases. It was based on an online survey that users were invited to answer with no opportunity for open debate and horizontal interactivity. The Bundestag also conducts so-called online conferences where citizens can pose questions to selected MPs, and online discussion fora, where statements of MPs on specific policy measures are discussed. In 2000/01 the Bundestag ran a pilot project where a particular legislative initiative was accompanied by a website providing information on the issue and a discussion forum. The users of the website of the German Bundestag also have the opportunity to file an online petition. Each petition reaches the petition committee of the German Bundestag which reviews it and takes action on the basis of formal guidelines and regulations.

The existing initiatives are interesting innovations. But they have obvious downsides. They firstly remain infrequent in those parliaments where they take place. The UK House of Commons is the most active parliament so far, but 16 online consultations in 7 years is not an overwhelming number. Secondly, few parliaments conduct such experiments or offer interactive features. My own research found no such activities in the Swedish Riksdag and the US House. Trechsel and his collaborators (2003: 11) found very low scores on their index for multilateral communication for most European parliaments, with the exception of the German Bundestag. A third downside of these initiatives is their low degree of institutional embeddedness. Online-consultations in the UK House of Commons are still based on a project approach rather than being a regular part of the legislative process written into the rules of the parliament. This is true for the interactive formats in the German Bundestag as well with the exception of the e-petition system.

### **The Future of Parliaments in the Digital Age**

The present usage and communication patterns are snap shots in a very dynamic technological and social environment. They raise questions about future developments at the levels of constituency communication, constituency behaviour and institutional change. Will parliaments go further in using the Internet to communicate with citizens? Will this affect parliaments as institutions? Will the behaviour of constituents change as an effect of changing patterns of communication? These questions can be approached by looking at those factors that explain the current trends in usage and e-communication.

Theories of electronic democracy have a deterministic bias. They perceive social and political institutions as being the product of specific media capacities such as bandwidth or interactivity. This has been rightfully criticized by authors such as Margolis and Resnick (2001) in the past. But these authors threw the baby out with the bath water, arguing for "politics as usual" on the net. I found in my research that technological capacities matter *under certain conditions*. I found in my research that the active involvement of advocacy coalitions in the US had a positive impact on the

media choices of MPs. Such coalitions voiced demands for digital constituency communication and offered educational services. I found for Germany that the structure of the district matters. MPs coming from more educated and well-to-do districts are more likely to use the Internet. I also found for Germany that generation matters in far reaching ways. MPs belonging to generation@ are much more open to the new technological opportunities than their older colleagues are. Under these conditions, media technology will push for “marginally unusual politics” in the future.

Technology is not the whole story when it comes to explaining constituency communication on the net. My own research shows that electoral systems and political culture influence the choices of MPs in considerable ways (Zittel 2003, 2007). Both variables are of different importance in different parliaments. Choices in the Swedish Riksdag are largely patterned by culture. Many Swedish MPs argue against the norm of individual representation and stress the party model as their main frame of reference in this respect. This norm manifests itself in organizational structures. In the Swedish Riksdag, all resources are allocated to the party groups. Swedish Parties do not hand over many resources to their MPs, who thus lack the means to design and maintain a personal website. The Swedish Riksdag furthermore does not provide services to individual MPs to develop and maintain a personal website. Choices in the German Bundestag are largely patterned by electoral incentives. MPs who ran in single member districts with good prospects to win in the previous elections are more likely to use personal Websites and to use them in far reaching ways. This is compared to German MPs who solely ran on party lists or who had no prospects to win a district in the previous elections.

### **Future Research on Parliaments and the Internet: Two New Priorities**

I see the current achievements of the research on parliaments and the Internet primarily in the study of media usage and electronic communication in the parliamentary sphere. This has to be updated on a continuous basis to further improve and develop our data basis. The need for more comparative research is apparent in this respect in order to be able to distinguish between secular and general developments and to further our understanding of the relationship between political context and impact.

Beyond this, I see the need to concentrate on two new research priorities. We should firstly better connect the online—and offline worlds. This means that we should focus on the institutional and behavioural ramifications of electronic constituency communication. This includes questions such as: Are MPs starting to emphasize direct communication in contrast to mediated communication in general? Do MPs who use the Internet in far reaching ways also deviate more often from their party in roll call votes? Do we see institutional reforms as an effect of electronic communication? Are citizens using the new means of communication and does it lead to an increasing interest in parliamentary affairs and politics?

A second research priority concerns the framing of the subject matter. The Internet has a very obvious and visible effect on the pluralisation and individualization of communication between the parliamentary and the social sphere. This can be researched in terms of responsiveness and transparency. But it can also be framed in light of concepts such as party democracy and collectivist representation. The Internet provides a means for more individualized forms of constituency communication that could serve as a catalyst for the further erosion of party government and the development towards more individualized forms of representation in West European democracies (See Zittel 2003).

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## Parliaments and the Internet: Identifying the Gaps

Philip Norton [Lord Norton of Louth]

This short article derives from two considerations. First, I reflect on some of the other papers in this collection. Mary Francoli identifies well the nature of much of the extant literature on the impact of ICTs on parliaments. Thomas Zittel presents his perspective on the state of research. My own research, testing four models of parliamentary representation against UK experience, appears in a forthcoming special issue of *The Journal of Legislative Studies* (Norton, 2007). That special issue also extends the research on the use of the Internet in parliaments in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Second, I am able to address the issue from the perspective of a participant-observer. As a parliamentarian, I am provided with a desktop PC, laptop and printer. I am a recipient of emails from lobbyists and individuals, a user of the parliamentary intranet and a consumer of material available on the Internet. I am a member of a chamber where access to a networked computer is common but not universal.

My purpose, therefore, is not to duplicate what is covered elsewhere but rather to draw on my research and my reflections as a participant-observer to identify what is *not* in the literature. There are, to my mind, three aspects that are not examined on any sustained basis. First, there is the use made by parliamentarians of the Internet as a source of information: in other words, for want of a better designation, parliamentarians as consumers. Second, there is the ethical dimension: the extent to which the use of the Internet by parliaments and parliamentarians is governed by a particular code of ethics. And, third, there is the impact on politics *within* the legislature.

### Parliamentarians as Consumers of Internet Resources

The focus of research on ICTs and parliaments has tended to be the impact of the Internet on the relationship between parliamentarians and citizens. To what extent has the Internet facilitated transparency and engagement? To what extent has it realised the potential to transform the relationship between electors and elected? The parliament-citizen relationship is, as I have variously argued, a much neglected relationship in the more established literature on legislatures, where the emphasis has tended to be on the parliament-executive relationship (Norton, 2005). However, in the literature on parliaments and the Internet, the emphasis has arguably been reversed. There is little research on the extent to which parliamentarians – outside the context of engagement – are able independently to use the Internet as a resource in fulfilling their ‘legislative’ as opposed to their ‘constituency’ roles (Norton and Wood, 1993). There is reference to being able to communicate more efficiently internally, for example by tabling questions or amendments electronically. But to what extent do parliamentarians and their staff employ the Internet to acquire information from extant official and unofficial sources?

The development of the Internet has created a burden as well as an opportunity for MPs in dealing with citizens, but it is arguably a notable benefit as a source of information that is otherwise unavailable or difficult to obtain. Within a matter of

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<sup>1</sup> See Dai and Norton (eds) (2007).



minutes, an MP or the Member's staff can obtain material that may otherwise have taken hours or even days to obtain, either by trooping off to the library or asking for material to be sent in the post. In a parliamentary context, time can be of the essence. A speech may have to be prepared at short notice: material available via the Internet may make the difference between an informed speech and not giving a speech at all. Material accessed via the Internet may facilitate an informed response to what a government minister has said. Sometimes that material may be supplied on an unsolicited basis by interested bodies but it may also be acquired through knowledge of websites or through a simple Google search. Parliamentarians are occasionally surveyed (electronically) as to what constitutes their principal electronic sources of news. What would make for a fascinating piece of research would be a study of what MPs have in their web 'favourites' list.

Access to information online may serve not only to facilitate legislative scrutiny and administrative oversight<sup>2</sup> but also to affect the behaviour of individual parliamentarians. There has been some study of the extent to which independent-minded members may use the Internet to develop links with electors and establish a relationship independent of party. Research of British MPs shows a negative relationship between rebelliousness and having a website (Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 73). However, what may be fruitful to explore is the extent to which members who are inclined to dissent from their party leaderships utilise the Internet to acquire material to sustain their positions. Members who doubt the position taken by the leadership may be wary of voting against the party line unless they have the information to hand that would enable them to counter the leadership's position. Access to an unprecedented volume of information and analysis, available online, has arguably helped challenge the near monopolistic position of the executive as an information provider.

### **The Ethics of the Internet**

There is a growing body of literature on the use of ICTs by parliaments and how this contributes to transparency and engagement, but relatively little on the ethics of that usage.<sup>3</sup> The issue is touched upon occasionally, but largely by inference.

For both parliaments and parliamentarians, there is the issue of what legitimately can be put on websites. Thomas Zittel notes that there is no evidence that parliaments have opted to disclose more information than was previously available.<sup>4</sup> Parliaments have put on the web material that is already in the public domain, though – as Pippa Norris has shown – the extent of the information made available varies from parliament to parliament.<sup>5</sup> The extent of the variability suggests that there is no commonly agreed code as to what should – and, equally importantly, what should not – be made available electronically. Is the fact that parliaments do not generally make more material available than is already in the public domain a matter of convenience or ethics? Given Norris' work, the most plausible explanation would be the former.

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<sup>2</sup> On the functions of legislatures (defined as consequences rather than formal tasks), see Packerham (1970).

<sup>3</sup> For an exception, see Dai, (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Zittel, T. 'Parliaments and the Internet: a perspective on the state of research', paper presented at the Workshop on *Parliaments in the Digital Age*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, 14-15 June 2007, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> As discussed in Zittel, 'Parliaments and the Internet', pp. 5-6.

Parliaments are busy trying to ensure that they do put more data on the web, but that it is a question of time and resources.

Given this, there may not be an immediate need for concern over the absence of any code governing material made available. The assumption would appear to be that, given that the material is already in the public domain, the same ethics apply as in the case of material sought in person or through the acquisition of printed parliamentary material. However, there is one aspect of web-based material that does potentially raise a distinct ethical issue. Zittel records that some parliaments are seeking to improve the provision of real-time information via the Internet, including audio streaming of proceedings and the same-day provision of chamber minutes. He draws on the experience of the German parliament. In the case of the UK, a transcript of the proceedings in each House is normally available approximately three hours after the debate in real time. However efficient those responsible for transcribing speeches, mistakes may occur and there is no opportunity for a member to check the transcript prior to it going online. Someone who did not watch the proceedings online (or on television) but relied instead on the uncorrected transcript may rely on an incorrect transcription. Normally, the mistakes are minor, but there is the potential for a significant error, such as the omission of a crucial 'not'. To what extent have the ethical implications of such a practice been discussed and agreed? Has there been a discussion beyond those responsible for making the information available? Has there been a sharing of thoughts between those parliaments that provide such information online or are considering doing so? There may have been, but it is a dimension that has not been researched.

One other aspect of providing information online is touched upon by Carol Devon in respect of the Scottish parliament.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most long-established legislatures, the Scottish Parliament's website constitutes the principal source of its published documentation. The sheer volume creates problems in terms of archiving the material but the fact that some material is available only online raises the issue of electronic copyright.

In terms of acquiring information online, there is one other dimension from an institutional perspective: that is in the use of online consultation. As both Ferguson and Zittel have recorded, the UK Parliament has been at the forefront of online consultation,<sup>7</sup> but such consultation has not been extensive: sixteen online consultations in seven years (1998-2005).<sup>8</sup> As Zittel notes, such interactivity is not institutionally embedded. Online consultation takes place on a project approach. What are committees or members to do with the material derived from online consultations? How much credence should they give it? As Coleman notes in his evaluation of online consultation, 'the danger of asking people for their views and then ignoring them is that they will lose confidence in both the process and the sponsoring institution' (Coleman, 2006: 17). To what extent can and should online consultations be utilized? Is it possible to generate generic guidelines that could be employed in any parliament engaging in such consultation?

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<sup>6</sup> Devon, C. 'The Scottish Parliament's Use of the Internet', paper presented at the Workshop on *Parliaments in the Digital Age*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, 14-15 June 2007, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> R. Ferguson, 'Parliaments and ICT – you can lead a horse to water, but can you make it surf?' paper presented at the Workshop on *Parliaments in the Digital Age*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, 14-15 June 2007; Zittel, 'Parliaments and the Internet', pp. 10-12.

<sup>8</sup> Zittel, 'Parliaments and the Internet', p. 12.

For members of parliament, there is the issue of what they can put on their websites and how they deal with email, both in terms of priority and content. To what extent is the provision and content of websites governed by parliamentary rules? In the UK, MPs may not use public funds to maintain a website that is used for partisan purposes. If they wish to use it as a means of promoting the party, they have to fund it themselves (or get the party or some supporters to do so). The use of websites to display party material varies (Norton, 2007). To what extent is such usage governed by a clear set of rules? What research has been done of the consequences of providing public funds to create and maintain MPs' websites? Even if not employed for overt partisan purposes, do such sites give MPs an advantage over their opponents? When the House of Commons voted in March 2007 to provide each MP with a £10,000 communications allowance, in addition to existing allowances, 'to assist in the work of communicating with the public on parliamentary business', one claim made by opponents was that it would 'give an enormous taxpayer-funded advantage to sitting Members of Parliament'.<sup>9</sup> MPs of the governing party voted overwhelmingly for it and Opposition MPs overwhelmingly against it.<sup>10</sup> To what extent is there evidence of an incumbency advantage in constituency-based systems as a result of publicly funded websites? To what extent should such support be limited or governed by strict ethical guidelines?

Then there are the ethics of email correspondence. As has been touched upon in the literature, there is the issue of how to deal with emails relative to ordinary mail. To what extent do MPs – or parliaments – generate rules to cover the use of email correspondence? Do they reply promptly or do they treat an email the same as a letter and reply on the same basis? Email correspondents often expect a same-day response. The technology is there to provide such a response. However, it is not uncommon for MPs in the UK to have automated responses stating that an email from a constituent will be treated in the same way as a letter and receive a response by letter. As one Conservative MP explained in a parliamentary debate:

... despite all the people who email us, we have to be conscious that there are still substantial numbers of people who will continue to write through the pigeon post, and who deserve every bit as timeous a reply as the email enthusiasts.<sup>11</sup>

The Labour MP in whose speech he was intervening concurred:

I take some pleasure in ensuring that I respond, usually on the basis of need but certainly in date order, to Mrs Miggins with her spidery writing, who is every bit as entitled to my attention as someone – we all have these people among those we represent, sadly – who emails an hour and a half after their original email, usually at 4 in the morning, to ask why we have not replied.<sup>12</sup>

The benefits of the technology may thus be lost because of the need to treat all correspondents equally, regardless of the form in which the communication is

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<sup>9</sup> Theresa May MP, Shadow Leader of the House, *House of Commons: Official Report (Hansard)*, Vol. 458, col. 1524 [28 March 2007].

<sup>10</sup> *House of Commons: Official Report (Hansard)*, Vol. 458, cols. 1548-51 [28 March 2007]: All Labour MPs, bar two, voted for the allowance. All Conservative MPs, bar two, voted against. See: [www.revolts.co.uk](http://www.revolts.co.uk)

<sup>11</sup> John Bercow MP, *House of Commons: Official Report (Hansard)*, Vol. 458, col. 1534 [28 March 2007].

<sup>12</sup> Martin Salter MP, *House of Commons: Official Report (Hansard)*, Vol. 458, col. 1534 [28 March 2007].

received. This may have the effect of upsetting email correspondents, conditioned to expect prompt electronic responses, while not necessarily generating offsetting appreciation from those who write.

This therefore generates the normative question as to how parliamentarians should treat electronic mail. There is also the question as to what extent does and should practice differ between those who represent constituencies and those who don't, such as those elected on a party list or, as in the case of the House of Lords, appointed members of a second chamber? Should they abide by the same rules as members corresponding with constituents?

There is a separate normative question covering content. Should the content be basically the same as it would be if sent by ordinary mail? To what extent should allowance be made for the less secure means of communication? To what extent can and do members check the content of an email reply in the same way as they check the drafts of paper correspondence? In the UK, some MPs have occasionally sent injudicious letters to correspondents, which have then been leaked to the press. Is there a greater propensity for such injudiciousness in email exchanges?

MPs in the UK appear to devise their own rules to determine how to deal with email. Some deal with the problem by not having email. Most, though, utilise it. Some will consult colleagues in generating their own office rules. What, though, constitutes best practice? And would best practice in one chamber travel well to another?

### **Internal Politics**

The use of email and intranet may, as Mary Francoli notes, 'increase office efficiency',<sup>13</sup> but it may also impact on political activity within the legislature. Email and an intranet facilitate communication that is quicker and cheaper than internal paper mail. As a consequence, it facilitates a greater volume of contact between parliamentarians. Parliamentarians send messages to a large number of colleagues which previously may not have been possible (too time-consuming, in some cases too expensive). This has a qualitative as well as a quantitative dimension. There may be a different pattern to that which has existed in communication through internal paper mail.

One example in the UK context is that of all-party groups. These are groups set up by members from different parties to examine particular topics and which, once registered, can utilise parliamentary facilities. They have grown in number in recent decades. In 1988 there were just over 100 subject groups and slightly more country groups. By 2004, there were 303 subject groups and 116 country groups (Norton, 2005: 127).<sup>14</sup> Some exist in name only, while others perform a useful service of raising issues. Their number has generated some controversy. They have to compete with one another for Members' attention – getting even a handful of MPs to attend a meeting is seen as an achievement – and their activity is seen as reducing attention to other parliamentary work, such as select committees.

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<sup>13</sup> Francoli, M. 'Parliaments Online: Modernizing and Engaging?' Paper presented at the Workshop on *Parliaments in the Digital Age*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, 14-15 June 2007, p. 2.

Their growth is unlikely to be attributable to the Internet, but the facility to email all members of both Houses is one that is a great boon to such bodies, which often lack much institutional support. The main work is often done by one MP, operating through a researcher or office assistant. In my experience, the largest single number of emails I receive comprises invitations to particular events, mostly though not exclusively from all-party groups. It would probably be difficult to sustain mailing out paper reminders on a regular basis to all parliamentary supporters, let alone to all parliamentarians, of meetings. The availability of email, and an electronic address book, enabling one to email all member in particular categories (MPs, peers), may therefore have helped keep in existence a number of all-party groups. It may also have the effect of marginalising those members who do not have email, who do not receive notifications of meetings and other events.

Such facilities may also facilitate members corresponding with one another on policy issues. One can reach one's colleagues quickly and, indeed, members of the other chamber. It is rare but not unknown for an MP to email members of the House of Lords urging them to vote against a particular measure. There is the potential for an exchange to develop if a member emails all members. During the run-up to the votes in 2003 on reform of the House of Lords, some parliamentarians emailed with their views, with one or two – taking a different view – responding with theirs. Such occasions are very rare, but the potential is enormous.

## Conclusion

There is a burgeoning research on parliaments and the Internet. The challenge is enormous: simply keeping up with advances in the technology is itself demanding. No sooner has a piece of research been published than it is out of date. What I have focused on in this paper is the challenge of examining consequences of the new technology for parliaments that have so far been largely neglected. The potential for research, rather like that of the Internet, is enormous.

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## Parliaments in the Digital Age: The Case of the French Senate's Website

Dorothee Roy

### The Main Initiatives

The French Senate created in December 1995 its website [www.senat.fr](http://www.senat.fr) and has today a “family” of four sites, attracting more than 10 millions single visitors each year. Since then, there has been several major changes either in design (refreshing the look), or content (for instance, new type of information online – full text of adopted laws within a few minutes, records of voting, added value and background information and so on). The last change in the graphical chart of the main site was made in 2004.

### A family of four websites

With a single philosophy: «*A website to serve the citizen*», the French Senate has a «family» of four websites dedicated to different publics:

- [www.senat.fr](http://www.senat.fr), created in December 1995, with today more than 230,000 «html» files, 3500 parliamentary reports online, 6000 «legislative files» accessible. It has a double nature: a generalist site for every citizen and a specialised site for professionals about legislative work online.
- [www.junior.senat.fr](http://www.junior.senat.fr): a site for a younger public which includes citizenship games through the little «Sénatin». Created in 1999, this was the first French site for children about citizenship. The site is focused on 8 to 13 year-olds, but it also includes material useful for parents and teachers.
- [www.carrefourlocal.senat.fr](http://www.carrefourlocal.senat.fr): created in 1999, this site aims to be a meeting point for local government bodies. According to the French Constitution, the Senate is entrusted with a special mission: representing the local bodies of the Republic—municipalities, “départments” (counties) and regions—both in metropolitan France and overseas.
- [www.expatries.senat.fr](http://www.expatries.senat.fr): a website for French citizens living abroad, it was created in September 2004. The site is meant as a help for French citizens abroad and for people in France wanting to live abroad.

This family of sites aims to deliver a specific message in relation to the Senate's missions:

- along with other communication events (for example “the parliament of children”) the “senat junior” was created to foster closer links with the educational community and to introduce a lighter image of the Senate more adapted to a young public.
- “expatries” and “Carrefour local” were created to enhance the particularity of the Senate compared to the National assembly. The 1958 Constitution entrusts the Senate with a particular mission to represent the local government bodies

(municipalities, *départements* and regions) and the French citizens living abroad. These two sites merely reflect the emphasis on this representative role.

- Building separate sites has helped to give more visibility to these specific missions, as well as fostered the creation of social networks with these communities (the two sites have or will soon have a newsletter).

### **Organization of administrative services supporting the site**

The Information and Technology Service has responsibility for the website (both technical and editorial), in close cooperation with the Communication service. Neither the Parties (that is the political groups) nor the Members of the Senate are involved, except those who represent the hierarchical political authorities of the Senate, such as the President or the Board. The political groups have their own websites, with a link from the senate's site. Approximately 80 senators (out of 331) have their own personal website or blog.

The publication online of every available document has been a well supported ambition among the Senate's staff. The political and administrative authorities are supportive of the Internet projects.

Most of the Internet publications are decentralised to the services that produce the information (permanent committees and delegations for the reports, communication for the press releases and so forth). Documents are thus produced in each respective service and directly uploaded on the site by each service, without the need of a specific approval for the Internet publication. The principle is that every "public" document physically available in the Senate, should be online the moment it is produced (sometimes even before printing).

Some internal methods have been modified in order to adapt to the need of publishing online. For instance, a new application was created in 2004 for the department of the "official comprehensive report", in charge of publishing the complete records of parliamentary debates. This application allows the publication online 48 hours after the sitting (instead of 15 days in the previous system), and, thanks to an accurate indexing, the inclusion of each declaration directly in the senators' pages (that is, a senator's statement made in the public sitting will be available online on their page on the Senate's site two days after).

The consequences of web tools have not yet been totally seized in terms of parliament's administrative organization. For instance, despite Internet publishing, the French Senate still has a department in charge of printing every document in paper. Even if the number of pages printed has reduced dramatically, every single document is still available in paper, and will remain so.

### **Successes and difficulties of the Senate's website**

The main objectives of the website are to strengthen democratic transparency and to build interactivity with the public. The first of these two goals has been achieved more easily than the second.



In terms of transparency, the site offers a wider range of tools from live information, with background explanations, contextual help, to an efficient search engine. The AMELI application (see below) is a good example of the effort for transparency.

In terms of interactivity, except from a few forums, an “institutional” blog (on polar research), and some online consultations from time to time, the site offers no direct contact between Senators and the public. There are no e-petitions, online surveys, or online posts on the Senators’ biography pages, for example. Creating a direct link via the Internet between the public and the Senators would maybe prove difficult, as the Senators are themselves elected by elected people (and not directly by the citizens) and have, therefore, less direct contact with their constituents than the deputies in the National Assembly.

### **Focus on the AMELI application**

The AMELI application, (AMELI for “Amendments Online”) is the web application used in the French Senate to table each of the 5,000 to 8,000 amendments introduced every year on the Senate’s floor. Thanks to AMELI, citizens have access to the content of amendments live from the homepage of the website. Amendments are available in the digital “legislative file” of every government’s and/or member’s bill, with an indication of the deliberative stage and the position of government and commission over each one. On the French Senate’s website, you can watch the law-making process live by following the order of the discussion, the video of the sitting, or accessing the content of the amendments discussed.

A similar application called BASILE allows Senators to table their oral and written questions online, as well as receive answers from the Government.

### **The Main Challenges**

One of the main challenges for the Senate’s website is to deal with different types of public. As with many other parliamentary websites, the Senate’s has two different target audiences: citizens in general and law professionals. We have chosen different ways to address each one of them: for the **citizens** we have developed convenient pages of explanations over the Senate’s role, the legislative process, understandable abstracts of the legislative or information reports, personal answers to 6000 emails sent to the webmaster each year and so on. Whereas for **professionals**, we have developed more relevant and detailed “Push” customized information such as a thematic newsletter, free email alerts, RSS flows and so on.

### **Further Developments**

The three main forthcoming priorities for the Senate’s website are to give clear information about law implementation, offer video content online and enhance citizens’ participation through blogs or forums.

Law implementation is a topic of increasing concern both for members of the Senate and citizens. Senators have the feeling that government bills are not implemented as fast as they should and that the attention on these dwindles once the initial media frenzy has passed. The Senate has developed its own legislative data basis, where information is available on every legislative file article by article, in order to check the

implementation of the laws voted by the Parliament. This is then made available on the Senate's site. The publicity of this information, thanks to the Senate's site, forces the Government to address the issue of law implementation.

The Senate is also trying to develop videos online. For the moment, a live broadcasting of the public sitting is available, along with some educational videos, in VOD, and specific public hearings in committees. We aim in the future to widen the number and type of videos available on the website, as well as to integrate them in the search engine. Searching on a key word, you could find either written documents (reports, debates, questions, and so on) or videos referring to the same theme. It would modernize and facilitate access from the citizens to parliamentary information.

More and more "internauts" want to participate in the law-making process, by giving their opinion to the Senators. The French Senate intends to develop in the future interactive services such as eConsultations. One of the main difficulties is that there is no possibility, neither in the Constitution nor in the Standing orders, to involve the citizens in the decision-making process (direct eDemocracy). The outcome of an online consultation/petition would merely result in better information for the Senators on the public's opinion over a certain matter.

## Parliament and Internet: The Case of the Netherlands House of Representatives Website ([www.tweedekamer.nl](http://www.tweedekamer.nl))

Piet van Rijn

Late in the 1990s, parliaments discovered the Internet, rather late, as a possible useful new medium to spread their message. In these early years it was not clear yet what that message should be and how it should be brought to the Internet users. It was a pioneering period with a lot of trial and error. In the world of the national parliaments we met regularly and informed each other of our experiences in a series of seminars called “Parliaments on the net”. Despite the sometimes substantial differences in political systems, practices and history there were mutual similarities. These “laws of the Internet” are universal, but we had to discover them as well as everybody else. This paper will use the old Internet-site of the Netherlands House of Representatives as a starting point to explain the principles and the design of the new website.

The Netherlands Parliament, or Staten-Generaal, consists of two houses. The House of Representatives has 150 members. The electoral system is almost completely proportional and there is no electoral threshold. To delegate a legislator, however, a political party must achieve at least the electoral quotient. Because of this system, the House usually includes the representation of many parties. Currently there are ten political groups, the smallest has two seats and the largest has 41. There are no constituencies as such and there is a full separation of powers; in a dualistic system an MP cannot be a member of the government and government-members cannot be MP; that is, if MPs join the government, they have to resign their seat.

The design of the previous website (there was one earlier predecessor in 1996, but that is now considered a trial) launched in 2002 was rather screaming and colourful, very much in line with the spirit of the late nineties. Navigation was unclear and against conventions (Nielsen),<sup>15</sup> its lay-out was organisation-oriented and the information it contained was dull and dry and not much up-to-date. Usability had not been an issue and there was no clear picture of the requirements of the users.

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<sup>15</sup> [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)



Figure 1: The 2002 Home page of the Dutch House of Representatives

In May 2004 the parliament initiated a project to design a new website. The project team was asked to design a new intranet site first, to gain experience. The design started in July 2004 with the actual work starting in October 2004. The intranet-site called “plein2” was launched in April 2005. The same project team started the Internet project in January 2005. Tender proceedings were completed in March and the list of demands approved in September 2005. The design phase was completed in January 2006. Building the new site took nine months, the site was launched in September 2006. The design was approved by the Management Team of the administration as well as by the political leadership—Presidium—of the House including the President. The project teams for both the intranet and the Internet projects consisted of Parliamentary staff that came from departments such as Communications, Information & Technology, Information Services, the Registration & Legislation Bureau and Parliamentary Reporting. Both project teams were led by an internal project manager. External experts were brought in only for specific (technical) jobs.

This project was an important part of the e-parliament programme. A programme aimed at supporting a large number of projects with the most important goal to integrate information systems and services in order to improve the quality of the parliamentary work and by doing so, improve the quality and quantity of information supplied to “outsiders”, the citizen. Completed projects include: email handling for MPs (2005), Autonomy as universal search engine (2006), XML (2005), websites—portals—for Committees (2006), enterprise/information and ICT architectures (2005-2007), a website for children (2005).

The project team established a set of criteria that the new website should meet, based on a users survey, web statistics and technical data. After the tender, an internal committee of MPs (Steering Group Automation & Information) discussed

these criteria, drawing thereafter an agreed “list of criteria” document together with the webdesign bureau. The list of criteria had three starting points:

- the user is central
- digital durability
- digital transparency

These were translated into:

- follow established (government) rules
- full accessibility for visually impaired users
- information on the political process and on parliamentary work
- usable for both professionals and laypersons
- good (universal) search function
- good signalling function
- technically updatable, following standards
- modern design, fitting for the “institution” Parliament

The project started by conducting a broad users survey based on questions such as ‘what do you expect to see on a parliamentary website?’, ‘what do you look for?’, or ‘how do you want it presented?’. The answers were analysed and compared with the site statistics. At the end of this process it was clear the kind of information the public wanted. After that a usability expert was responsible for the main navigation structure, which was conducted by using the card sorting method.<sup>16</sup> This part of the work was contracted out to avoid any influencing. The result of this survey was a click-dummy of a website: people were asked to navigate through the design, their behaviour was filmed and their click-actions were plotted. This resulted in an adjustment of the design. These actions were repeated as often as necessary. Agreements were made with internal content providers including quality standards. Decisions were made to include information from outside (the national news agency), as well as on the level of inclusion and reference (links) to political information, individual MPs’ websites and party sites.

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<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20040719.html><sup>16</sup>

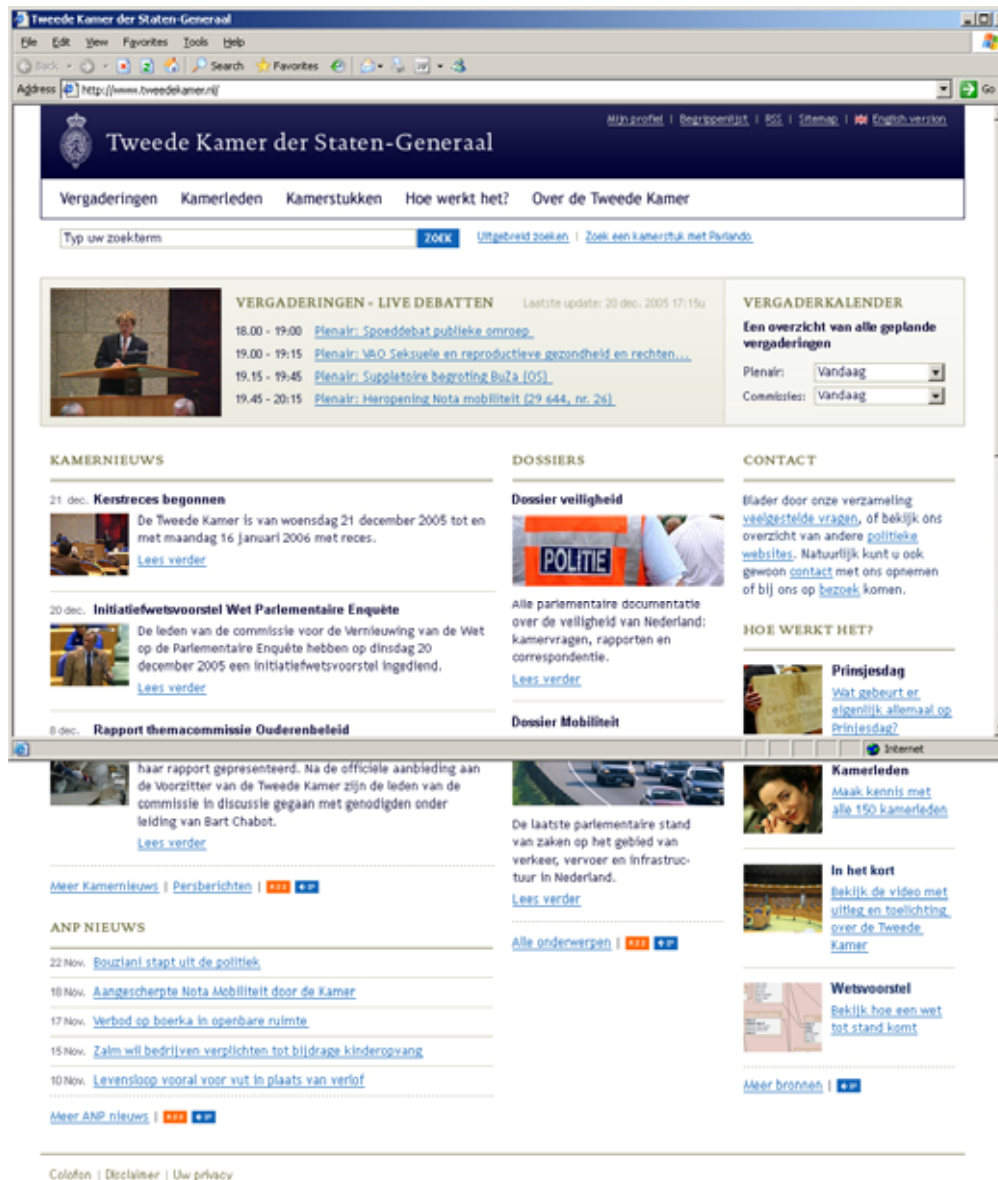


Figure 2. The new home page of the Dutch House of Representatives

The website is clearly a product from and by the civil service organisation of the House. It shows topical and factual information of the political process in the House and no party political information, political statements of individual MPs or information from the Government. There are, however, a large number of references (links) to the sites of MPs, political parties, the government and so on. After the project phase, the administrative organisation of the House has taken over the management of the websites, in this case the Communications department. Full time editorial staff are appointed to manage the site and a fixed budget is set aside for maintenance and development. The governing board of the e-parliament programme, that consists of the heads of all departments involved, acts as feedback.

The main qualities of the new site are in terms of functionality, content, form and technicality:

#### Functionality

- clear and unequivocal information structure

- a universal search function
- signalling of new relevant information
- sound basis for further development

#### Content

- up-to-date information
- attention for making potentially dry information more attractive
- both political content and background information
- good and reliable referencing (both internal and external)

#### Form

- style, class, distinction and authority
- many possibilities of variations in lay-out and presentation
- good (search engine) readability
- interface according to conventions

#### Technicality

- latest standards
- integration with other/future systems

The website was attributed the “*drempels vrij*”(free of thresholds) certification. This lists high standards of readability and usability by the national organisation of the visually impaired.<sup>17</sup> Early 2007 the website of the House was awarded the second prize in the Dutch Usability award. After the public selected the ten best websites of over 800 sites, a professional jury judged these ten best.<sup>18</sup>

To maintain a website such as the Dutch parliament one and to keep it up-to-date editors and money are needed. The group of editors now consists of four people.<sup>19</sup> Statistical programmes constantly monitor the use. A budget for the maintenance and renewal has been set aside annually. After the launch, late 2006, constant monitoring has been pursued including user surveys, which result in on-going adaptations to the design.

In the near future the products of various systems (e-parliament projects) that are now in development will be added to the website. They include:

- more agenda information and details on documents, related to both plenary and committee debates (e-parliament project Parlis, expected end 2007).

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<sup>17</sup> [www.accessability.nl/toetsing](http://www.accessability.nl/toetsing)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.usabilityaward.nl/> (in Dutch)

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.houseofrepresentatives.nl/administration/organisation\\_chart/index.jsp](http://www.houseofrepresentatives.nl/administration/organisation_chart/index.jsp)

- a real-time verbatim report of the proceedings (e-parliament project VLOS, expected early 2008).
- video-images of the debates, processed with information on the speaker and on the item of the agenda, both live and archived (e-parliament project DBG, expected early 2008).

There are plans to improve existing features such as more audiovisual material (VOD-casting), a more complete virtual tour and a more robust infrastructure, dedicated hosting and possible outsourcing of the technical management.

An operation such as the building and maintenance of a modern website puts strains on the administration of a Parliament. The user of a website is not interested in subtle differences of opinion between organisational units. Parliaments are in general organised in a traditional way,<sup>5</sup> the maintenance of a website forces various specialised departments to work together and to re-package and deliver information and documents. This requires a different way of thinking, it requires a change in the flow of budgets, and duties (and people) will have to be shifted from one department to another. This, in my view, has been our major difficulty. In general for parliamentary administrations the introduction of websites in the heart of their information and communications services, will require a new way of thinking about the organisation of the administration and it will force them to a different organisational structure.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## The Portuguese Parliament in the Digital Age

Joao Viegas d'Abreu

Before we can analyse the Portuguese Parliament's situation in the digital age, we must consider the role played by the Assembly of the Republic (AR) and how it articulates its work with the other sovereign bodies.

Similarly to what has happened in many other parliaments, the AR has gradually moved away from a situation where its central identifying feature was to legislate, having evolved towards a greater investment in its control, monitoring and representation functions. This does not mean it has lost its legislative responsibilities, but rather that it now reserves itself for those legislative initiatives which are really structural to the system. The classic relationship of the separation of powers has now been succeeded by a shared relationship between a variety of actors, in which the media are making an ever more prominent place for themselves, along with a whole range of independent administrative bodies.

In this changing scenario it is of no surprise the emergence of issues which touch on everything from the very existence of a parliament<sup>20</sup> to the role it plays and its relationship with the other sovereign bodies. As a result many parliaments are currently in the midst of reform or modernisation processes and are making the same diagnoses and setting the same objectives<sup>21</sup>. One element of these processes is that the latest information and communication technologies (ICT) are taking on an ever more important role.

### Scope of ICT in the Portuguese Parliament

The AR has been making a major effort to modernise itself. This process has three key dimensions:

- Equipping MPs with IT resources that allow them to be mobile and to work at a distance.
- Simplifying procedures and making them more flexible.
- Improving the interaction with citizens.

As part of the first dimension, the Chamber and committee rooms have been fitted with a wireless network. Also, MPs are given laptops, when they are on official missions abroad, with VPN (Virtual Private Network) wireless technology, palmtops and Internet access via GPRS/3G. They also have access to a Unified messaging system: SMS, Fax, Voicemail and a Text-to-speech capability that is integrated with

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<sup>20</sup> It is not by chance that in a document written by the Group on Information for the Public, House of Commons, entitled *"Engaging the public : Business Plan"* (May 2007), one objective to be achieved by 2011 is that people recognise that Parliament is "worthwhile (i.e. of real value)".

<sup>21</sup> Examples of this – in terms of objectives – include the European Parliament, Spain's Congreso de los Diputados and the British House of Commons.

their email service. A system that provides a parliamentary weblog (blog) and personal pages for MPs has also been created.

In order to simplify procedures and make them more flexible, the *Diário da Assembleia da República* (the AR's official journal) is published exclusively electronically since 2003. In addition to improvements to the audio and time control system, *Canal Parlamento* (the Parliamentary TV Channel) is now also available on the Internet. The databases make it possible to provide all the information about the Parliament's work in real time. The Government, the AR, the Office of the President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court have recently signed a Convention on Electronic Certification, which is intended to allow the legislative process to circulate between the four bodies on a dedicated network with digital signatures.

A number of online discussion forums have been created in order to promote interaction with citizens<sup>22</sup>. This allows public discussion of the most important legislative initiatives and the system also accepts electronic petitions. We are thus moving forward from the perspective of the merely passive citizen user to that of the active citizen user.

### Parliament's Website

The AR's website ([www.parlamento.pt](http://www.parlamento.pt)) has been a key tool in this improvement of the relationship with citizens. The main objectives of the site are:

- To make the institution known
- Bring citizens closer to MPs and parliament
- Disclose parliament's and MPs' daily activities, as well as all the events that occur in the AR

The site has developed considerably since 1996, when it was first introduced. At that time the site presented static and dynamic contents, requiring considerable efforts for updating and maintenance. Input of information was centralized in the technical team that managed the site. In particular, the fact that a mature intranet did not exist then meant that the automatic integration with the site was non-existent.

A new version of the site was launched in 2002 favouring a qualitative and quantitative leap of the contents with respect to its structure and presentation. A new layout was set for the purpose and new functions were introduced with special reference to a virtual visit to the Palace of S. Bento (where the Parliament is located). The site was again updated in 2004, based upon the development of various dynamic components which provide the user with a vast set of online information thanks to an integration of its search facilities with the internal data bases.

The site is currently under reconstruction with a particular focus on issues of design, communication and image, associated to a new layout. Once this stage is completed we will focus on new functions, such as making available a new management application that has been specifically developed for the consideration of the State Budget. We will also improve current applications such as the Data Base of

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<sup>22</sup> The first forum was launched on 2004 and since then nine have been created. The average of participation is around 35 comments per forum.

Parliamentary Activity, to make it more user friendly particularly for those who are not very conversant with parliamentary language. The site has been developed for a very wide ranging audience from ordinary citizens, to the media, or academics. The development of site areas for mobile platforms (wap) is planned for a subsequent phase.

The site is managed by the Centre for Citizen's Information and Public Relations, which works in close coordination with the Computer Centre, responsible for the AR Intranet. Team work between staff working on the intranet and the Internet is encouraged as many of the solutions are of a similar nature. The Centre also coordinates its work with other parliamentary services on a continuous basis in order to feed information into the site's contents. The Centre deals less with the MPs themselves directly, unless for specific cases when applications relate with the dissemination of their work. This is the case with Blogs, Personal Pages and Discussion Forums. In these cases the Centre promotes specifically dedicated training sessions.

The current site has a wealth of information and we consider this to be our main success: the disclosure online of parliamentary activity and information about legislative procedures (laws, decrees, debates, resolutions, and so on). The area which has proved more difficult has been parliamentary committees. This is due to the large number of committees, raising difficulties at times in establishing a consensus over the type of contents to be made available. The other main difficulty is to keep track of, and quickly adapt to, the constant technological developments in this area.

### **Use of ICT by MPs**

Despite these developments, a 2003 study<sup>23</sup> on the Portuguese MPs' practices and perceptions in their use of ICT said that:

Portuguese parliamentarians display a certain lack of interest and mistrust in the potentials of the new communication technologies, the reasons for which may be centred both on internal factors within the Parliament (parliamentary structure, electoral system, party system, and parliamentary political culture), and on external factors (media system, general political culture, and dissemination of ICTs in society).

The study concludes that the barriers to the development of a digital democracy in Portugal fall within three interlinked aspects:

- A media system in which television, and to a lesser extent the newspapers, predominate; and in which media journalists, editors, investors and owners seek to keep under their control the access channels to the political actors and the resulting link to the population.
- A system which does not promote direct contacts between political actors and electors and in which parliamentarians are restricted by the directives issued by

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<sup>23</sup> "O Parlamento português na construção de uma democracia digital" – Gustavo Cardoso, Carlos Cunha and Susana Nascimento, in *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas* no. 42, 2003, pp 113, 140.

their party leaderships and Parliamentary Groups. This is in turn reflected in a more limited individual use of the latest ICT in the political field.

- A lack of motivation among citizens to take part in politics also tends to discourage an end to this vicious cycle of the political non-appropriation of the Internet in a parliamentary framework.

## New Challenges

A reform process is currently underway in the AR, having already resulted in the report 'Reforming and Modernising the AR in order to better serve citizens',<sup>24</sup> issued by the Socialist Party's Parliamentary Group, under the coordination of António José Seguro MP. This report sets out a number of guiding principles for reform, including:

- a Parliament that is accountable and close to its citizens.
- a Parliament that is more transparent and sets an example.

Within the overall framework of these principles, the report presents a set of proposals which aim to increase the information available on the AR's website about parliamentary activity and MPs. It also sets out a range of mechanisms which aim to allow opportunities for citizens to participate and increase levels of interactivity.

However, we should note that although the conclusions of the study we mentioned earlier refer to 2003, they are still valid. For example:

- Solutions that enable Portuguese parliamentarians to create personal webpages and blogs were made available in 2004. To date only one Member has a personal page and only 10 have created blogs, most of which are no longer active.<sup>25</sup>
- The option to submit petitions online has tripled the number that are received and officially accepted. It has also increased the petitioners' expectations in terms of the response speed, but they have been disappointed in this respect, in part because the larger number of petitions has itself slowed down their processing.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *"Reformar e Modernizar a Assembleia da República para servir melhor as cidadãs, os cidadãos e a democracia"* Partido Socialista, Abril 2007.

<sup>25</sup> The service responsible for the website developed a web page template made available to MPs, with a set structure for shaped content (text, image and html documents). Based on this model any MP can upload any kind of information they wish to publish. The only MP personal website developed till now is from the former Speaker who has a personal assistant. One of the reasons that explain the low number of MPs' personal pages relates to the fact that they do not have the support of a personal assistant and parliamentary services are not able to provide them with adequate staff to perform that task. The reform of parliament approved in July, 2007 considered providing a personal assistant to each MP.

<sup>26</sup> The e-petitions were introduced in 2003. Since then the number of petitions has increased considerably. The total number of petitions received since the beginning of this Legislature (March 2005) is 389, where 258 are e-petitions.

## **Conclusions**

The statistics showing an increased adoption of the Internet by citizens, and particularly the growing number of visitors to our site, lead us to believe that users value more and more the advantages of reaching all the information required at the simple click of the mouse. It is very important that, on the one hand, the technicians responsible for the Web understand that this is an area under constant development and that the peoples' expectations are ever greater; on the other, that Parliamentarians show themselves receptive to the contact and interaction with citizens. The Portuguese Parliament first needs an adjustment to its back office (political and administrative) in order to respond to the added interaction with citizens that a digital parliament implies. We believe that a parliament in the digital age cannot limit itself to implementing technical solutions with a digital interface, but has to move ahead with changes that entail structural, organisational and procedural adjustments that will enable it to respond to the increased expectations which the digital age is generating among citizens.

## The Scottish Parliament's Use of the Internet

Carol Devon

The Scottish Parliament was established and met for the first time in 1999. From the outset the Parliament has embraced principles of openness and accessibility and has an explicit vision to increase public awareness and understanding of the Parliament, to build confidence in itself and in the devolution settlement as a whole. The Parliament also set out with an implicit mission to improve on practices which were familiar from Westminster. Officials have been concerned to simplify procedures and reduce barriers to public understanding such as might be created by complex procedures or unexplained ceremonial.

In common with other Parliaments all over the world, it also shares a concern about a lack of public interest in voting, in politics and in parliamentary processes in general. As a new Parliament there was a real drive to make sure that the public appreciated, not only the fact that they had a new Parliament, but what it could do for them. The underlying principles of openness and accessibility make the Parliament distinctive in that it has a clear objective to encourage participation as well as a mandate to legislate. The Internet was always seen as a key tool in bringing the Parliament closer to the people. It was established and launched ahead of the Parliament's opening in 1999.

The age of the Parliament further distinguishes it from more established legislatures. Without a legacy of previous years of practice and procedures, we were able to achieve a number of notable firsts on our website. Our Opening Ceremony on 1 July 1999 was webcast world-wide, and an early decision was taken that all proceedings of both plenary and Committees would be webcast. In part, this was a reaction to the fact that as a devolved Parliament we do not have access to our own broadcast channel, although we are working with cable providers to see whether we can agree some extended coverage. We were also concerned to bypass editorial decisions of broadcasters that experience told us had concentrated more on the confrontational aspects of politics than on the substance of real policy improvements. At that time the digital divide in Scotland was still fairly wide, but eight years on Internet access has increased amongst the population significantly, largely due to the efforts of the Scottish Executive to roll out Broadband interconnectivity to as many of the regions as possible.

In our first session we also piloted discussion forums based on each day's Members' Business Debate. In principle this was a fine idea, allowing Members to gather opinions and interest group comments on subjects that they were about to debate, and then incorporate them into that debate. Unfortunately, Parliamentary timetables dictate that at most two weeks' notice is given of a debate being agreed, which makes it difficult to set up, publicise and conduct such a discussion forum meaningfully. Consequently they were not continued, although we are still seeking ways of increasing 'interactivity' or 'participation' via the Internet.

We also have a specific section of our website aimed at children and school teachers. Most of the Education pages are aimed at teachers although there is a dedicated games area for children, and we will be looking to develop this in the future. Our curricular support material will soon be available on an Executive-led Intranet available to all schools and teachers.

The website remains the principal source of all our published documentation, as our Freedom of Information (FoI) Publication Scheme will attest. Core Parliamentary documents are also printed, but this is becoming increasingly expensive, and there is a growing class of borne digital documents with no print equivalent for example the catalogue of our art collection. Over the last eight years, the amount of documentation published on our website has increased tremendously and we find ourselves with a text-heavy website which is difficult to search. Our technical infrastructure is now being upgraded so that we can improve the structuring of our data and its searchability, but we are also struggling with concerns over long-term archiving implications and the developing area of electronic copyright.

The Parliament has always been keen to embrace the advantages of e-democracy. In doing so, it has had to bear in mind that it is first and foremost a political institution where the views and wishes of Members must be taken into account. There has been the potential for exciting developments. For example, we pioneered the use of biographical video clips of Members which we posted on our website in Session 2. By all accounts these are a world first for a representative institution. We have evidence that they help to attract younger voters and also make biographical information that bit more interesting for everybody. We are currently refreshing them with a new set of videos for the new Members elected in May.

Freedom of Information legislation in Scotland is every bit as useful to journalists as it is in the rest of the UK and, despite having the most liberal publication regime in the UK for Members' allowances, we found ourselves the target of increasing questioning on very detailed aspects of Members' expenditure. Whilst we were very efficient at paying Members what they claimed, we were not prepared for the information overload that FoI would cause us in this area. We commissioned a database that would allow us to structure information about individual Members' expenditure in such a way that it could be retrieved by the citizens—and by extension also by journalists. This involved a great deal of work in the development stage. Not only did we develop a database, we also undertook to display scanned receipts to which the expenditure referred. As a result FoI inquiries numbers dropped and the workload on the office concerned returned to more manageable levels. Staff had effectively transferred their effort from answering enquiries from journalists, to making information available to all on the website.

Arguably our greatest success has come from the development of an e-petitioning system. Its strength lies in the fact that it is based on a robust parliamentary process that petitions undergo. Without that, submitting an e-petition would be little more than posting it on a virtual notice board. In 2005 we re-developed and re-launched our e-petitions system. It now provides a discussion forum for each petition, the ability to register a new petition or to sign the petitions of others and the ability to track the progress of the petitions through the parliamentary process. The German Bundestag has modelled its recently launched system on our own. The key to our success is that we have built an electronic access point on to a meaningful parliamentary process for the consideration of petitions.

The look and feel of our website last had a major overhaul in 2004, in advance of our move to Holyrood. At that stage we moved to a home page which is more media-focussed with a 'busy' feel, updated through the day, to reflect the views of the then Presiding Officer and the Corporate Body.

It could be argued that there has been little innovation in evidence on the website over the last two or three years. One of our main constraints is the technical infrastructure underpinning the site, which makes it difficult to deliver enhanced

functionality without significant manual efforts which are difficult to maintain. During this time a group of staff spent a considerable amount of time benchmarking with other parliaments and investigating consultation software and various other e-democracy tools. They concluded, however, that what mattered to us was that any tools should assist the parliamentary process rather than complicate it, and be not just an add-on but an integral part of how the parliamentary process works. We felt that much of the consultation software we looked at did not offer anything over and above the systems and access to them that we already possessed, so we rejected them for now.

We are now stepping back and reviewing what we want to do with the website as a whole from now on. The website's objectives were last reviewed in 2002 and are as follows:

- Sharing of information
- Equality of access
- Encouraging use
- Widening participation
- Reflecting our culture

Whilst these objectives may still drive our strategy, how can we meet them five years on? We need to look again at our target audiences and be more successful in consulting with them to find out what they want. This will involve identifying non-users as well as the user groups we are more familiar with (public bodies, the Media, young people, visitors, etc.). Once our technical infrastructure has been upgraded we also need to streamline roles and responsibilities so that our publishing processes allow us to manage our information more effectively.

Other challenges we face concern the integration of different formats, making sure our website complies with accessibility standards (and continues to do so) and, above all, improving its searchability so that people can actually find what they are interested in. Only by doing so can we make the Parliament relevant to them.

It will be for others to judge whether we have succeeded in bringing the Parliament closer to the people using the website. Feedback suggests that we have made progress but that there is still a way to go. As well as the success of our e-petitions system and webcasting services, we are often praised for the amount of material available via our website compared to those of other Parliaments. One of our achievements has been to publish material in addition to our official documents that is not generally available elsewhere – allowances information, background papers for meetings, correspondence, corporate policies and so on. Ironically, the sheer weight of information available has also been one of our main constraints in managing and developing the website. While our technical infrastructure has not facilitated dynamic delivery of content, the site has continued to grow, making it difficult to keep on top of the content as well as slowing down progress on improving the site's functionality.

In the last analysis, our primary function is not to develop a website, but to support the parliamentary process, and that is always at the forefront of our minds in any development we consider. It is difficult for a public sector website to balance the need to spend money wisely against the desire to be viewed as interesting and engaging.



## National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia: Problems and Dilemmas in the Maintenance of its Website

Saša Mehak Rojec

### **Introduction**

Parliamentary websites over the world are becoming increasingly rich in content, suggesting that the administrators thereof are more and more aware of the significance and potential advantages of Internet technology. It is clear that topics are to be offered on the Internet only when the up-to-dateness of the published information can be assured. Less clear, however, is when, to what extent and under what conditions should parliamentary website users be offered interactive communication. This is just one of the many dilemmas faced by the Slovene National Assembly.

This paper provides a summarised analysis of the contents of the Slovenian National Assembly website, with a particular focus on the problems and dilemmas faced by its website editors.

### **Parliamentary Website Patterns in Europe**

In 2005, the National Assembly's website was restructured on the basis of an analysis made then of the contents of the websites of other parliaments of the EU Member States. Results showed that the content of a typical parliamentary website follows more or less the same pattern although significant differences in quality may be observed. These websites' main purpose remains to disseminate information, that is, informing the users about the work of parliament. The main elements include documents relating to the legislative procedure, information on upcoming and current events, data on the composition of parliament and MPs, education, presentation of the parliamentary building or even virtual guides, often accompanied by audio/video broadcasts of plenary sessions, and so on. Most parliaments provide their website users with the possibility to communicate with MPs either through website forms or email addresses, while only a few parliaments provide interactive communication via a forum.

### **The Website of the Slovenian National Assembly**

The National Assembly of Republic of Slovenia presented its website for the first time in December 1994. Based on technological progress and practical experience, the website has been constantly upgraded in technical, content-related and organisational terms. The major re-designs were made in December 1997, September 1999 and October 2005.

The website comprises over 100,000 documents reproduced automatically from the internal system, so there is no special work for publishing the documents on the Internet. Our regular legislative procedure is computer-assisted by applications written in Lotus Notes. Those applications are available only from our LAN (Local Area Network—Intranet). To get the data available through to the Internet, we use

automatic procedures that convert data from Lotus Notes to XML and then to the website. The content not directly connected to legislative procedures (such as reports on events, information about the building and so on), is entered into the application TYPO3. This application is managed by six people (Public Relations Office, Office of the President of the National Assembly, Office of the Secretary General, Committee on EU Affairs and Department for the Development of the Information System), who belong to the special team responsible for the website.

### **Facing the Same Problems?**

Since 2005, the website of the Slovene National Assembly has been so rich in content that outside users such as the press are now able to follow the work and events in the National Assembly exclusively via the Internet. Statistics show that the most frequently accessed topic is the legislative database including adopted laws/acts, draft laws/acts, verbatim records of sessions, and so on. The configuration of our information system makes possible that information is reproduced from the LAN to the Internet. As the information is entered exactly where it is created, there is no problem with up-to-dateness. However, the large quantity of documents slightly slows down the search engine and the display of the selected document(s), which users may find frustrating sometimes. We have increased the capacity of the server, but no major progress has so far been achieved. For the near future, we plan to implement code optimisation. In this respect, I need to point out a mistake we made when creating the site: the system testing was carried out on an insufficient number of documents and the results did not anticipate any problems.

Providing standard CVs on MPs' biographical sites is another major problem. Although forms with obligatory fields were prepared and submitted for compilation, the data are not sufficiently structured. Quite often, editors receive freely written CVs, with certain data missing which makes it impossible to present the information in the desired form. The problem increases with the need for updating. We have observed that some MPs do not update their CVs when holding the office for a few consecutive terms, and certain CVs can be 10 years old or even older. In these cases, it is difficult to update the data. This problem is however less evident on specific types of information relating to each MP, such as membership of parliamentary working bodies, friendship groups and so on, as these are reproduced automatically from other updated databases.

I also need to point out the problem of providing other language versions of our website besides Slovenian. Despite the fact that there are two national communities living in Slovenia (Italian and Hungarian), the information is only available in English and even there this is a part translation. Static contents have been translated into English, while no updating of the dynamic ones (such as events) to any languages can be provided.

### **Categorisation of Current Topics**

Categorisation is a particular problem, persisting in some areas ever since the beginning. In particular, the policy of publishing current topics (events, photos, etc.) requires close dialogue between different people and political actors. Which event/photo is more important depends on the subjective assessment of the website editors, whose opinions often differ considerably. When it comes to publishing a photo on the home site, the importance of the person on the picture and their political

affinity need to be weighted. Moreover, several events may be taking place at the same time yet only one may occupy the front page. It is also necessary to choose events that are sufficiently interesting to the public and create a photo gallery thereof. Another problem is the content of the permanent category "Topic of the week", where the appropriate topic must be selected. It occurs quite often that given the number of events taking place simultaneously no topic may be found that could characterise the entire week.

## **User Satisfaction**

Here we consider a number of problems directly linked to user satisfaction and the type of information users look for on our website.

Is the large number of databases actually reducing transparency in the search on the parliamentary website? According to statistical data, the most frequently required information are documents relating to the legislative procedure (adopted laws/acts, draft laws/acts, etc.). The same data indicate that relatively few users click for help when accessing the website. Their questions most often refer to the search for documents, above all draft laws or discussions of laws already adopted. We also note that many users do not use the advanced search option or fail to find documents due to insufficient knowledge of the legislative procedure, e.g. they are not familiar with the expression "amendment", and so on. The result is that they get lost in the number of documents. Many of them also search for roll-call records of voting on certain issues. As in the process of adopting a law/act voting is held several times, information thereof is displayed next to the text on which the National Assembly voted. Thus, for example, no roll-call voting on an adopted law exists. Voting is in fact held in relation to the draft, not the adopted law. The information required may be found in the category relating to the discussion of such law. Brief instructions thereon are provided directly above the search engine, but users simply fail to read them.

A different problem relates to the information gap on our website regarding cooperation with the European Union (EU). This is due simply to the fact that many of the meetings of the Committee on EU Affairs are closed to the public. We only include committee membership and the transcripts of the meetings that are open to the public. We also note that public interest in this topic is relatively poor. So the question arises of how to bring such topic closer to the users. One of the possibilities that has been considered is the addition of new sub-sites to supplement the missing dynamics—such sites are already being set up for the period of Slovenia's presidency of the EU Council.

The publication of email addresses increases the quantity of SPAM. In addition to that, MPs receive a large amount of emails with questions, motions, and even insults. These are the two main reasons why the National Assembly has introduced web forms for the contact with MPs. This reduces the length of each message and requires additional confirmation from the indicated email address. On the other hand, many users would prefer a list of email addresses of all MPs in the National Assembly, parliamentary working bodies or deputy groups, in order to be able to send the same message to several MPs at the same time. How to limit unnecessary electronic mail and simultaneously satisfy the users? Such dilemma causes a contradiction of interests also among the National Assembly staff.

Another question related to the above dilemma is: Creating a forum on parliamentary websites—yes or no? Why not, after all we are living in democracy, with technology enabling unbiased identification of the author of the message (digital certificate). Yet

still, what are the benefits? Our main concern is that the expectations from the users would be too high. Moreover, quality would very much depend on the maturity of the users and on the MPs' interest in participating. For the time being, a forum with limited functionality is available on the National Assembly's website: topics may be opened on the proposal of a working body, users are not able to open new topics and the publication of each message must be approved by the moderator. Experience shows that response has so far been poor (on average five replies per topic), and no proposals have yet been presented by the users to open up a general forum.

## **Conclusion**

The audience of our website are government staff, students, press, the interested public and so on. We are well aware of the potential advantages offered by Internet technology, and certainly making good use of the advantage offered by the impartial presentation of various information topics to a broad circle of people. The website (including the documents) has also been adapted to the needs of the blind, and we are cautious in enabling interactive communication. Our aim is to satisfy the users as much as possible.

## The UK Parliament in the Digital Age: A Personal Perspective

Dominic Tinley

### Background

In May 2004 the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons highlighted dissatisfaction amongst the public with Parliament's website. Users were critical of the website's navigation with many suggesting the search facility was not satisfactory and that information was not classified and grouped in a helpful way. The Committee recommended "a radical upgrading of the website at an early opportunity",<sup>27</sup> and in January 2005 this was supported by a resolution in the House with a 375/14 majority.

In May 2005 a Commission chaired by Lord Puttnam, under the auspices of the Hansard Society, recommended a shake up of the way Parliament manages communication with the public. In July 2005 the Lords Information Committee considered its report (Members Only: Parliament in the Public Eye) and agreed that in order to realise change the House should start by focusing on improving its Internet presence.

Responsibility for the website and intranet had until this point fallen to several different departments due to the federal nature of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. This had led to the services developing organically rather than being planned coherently. The Board of Management in the Commons and Management Board in the Lords therefore decided the governance for the website and intranet should be simplified and would rest with two Strategy Boards, an Internet Strategy Board and an Intranet Strategy Board.

In October 2005 I was appointed as Managing Editor of the website and intranet, to head up a new Web Centre team responsible for central coordination of the two services. This would be a *single* team working on the website and intranet but reporting into the *two* Strategy Boards.

In January 2006 the Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology service (PICT) was established to bring together the disparate IT functions from across both Houses of Parliament into a single department. This new IT department is the primary IT service provider to the Web Centre team.

A business case for a "radical redesign" of the website was finally approved in principle by the relevant Committees in both Houses in spring 2006, and work began planning a five-year programme of improvements.

Based on an initial study of public reactions to the website and on internal consultation, the Internet Strategy Board defined a strategy around three key concepts:

- **Inform** – making parliamentary information accessible to the public and others.

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<sup>27</sup> House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, Connecting Parliament with the Public, First Report of Session 2003–04, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmmodern/368/368.pdf>

- **Promote** – helping the public recognise that Parliament acts in their interests and enabling them easily to find out about its work and role independent and distinct from government.
- **Listen** – provide a mechanism for Parliament to seek and respond to feedback in order to better engage people with its work and to help the public recognise that Parliament is an institution which listens impartially to their views in support of its constitutional role.

## **Plans**

The Internet Project has been established as a user-focused proposition. This in itself is a radical change in Parliament's thinking as previous projects of this nature have been IT led, viewing the world through Parliament's eyes rather than through the public's eyes.

Parliament's Web Centre now employs five Web Producers working across the website and intranet for both Houses. Their role is to represent users through all stages of development, from early editorial ideas, to design concepts, and finally technical delivery. It has also recently recruited five Content Editors, primarily working on the website, whose role will be to ensure the text on the website is as accessible as possible both to insiders and members of the public with little or know knowledge of Parliament.

In September 2006 the team carried out early work to create a more logical high-level structure for the website involving four phases of user research (usability testing, card sorting, wireframe testing, design testing). In total, 50 people were consulted representing different audience groups that currently use the site including students, lawyers, journalists, government officials, teachers, and Members themselves.

In January 2007 Parliament commissioned a more detailed survey of over 350 people including audience groups that do not currently use the site or currently have any intention of doing so. This was completed in April 2007. From this information Parliament will devise new services for each group and prioritise them according to user need.

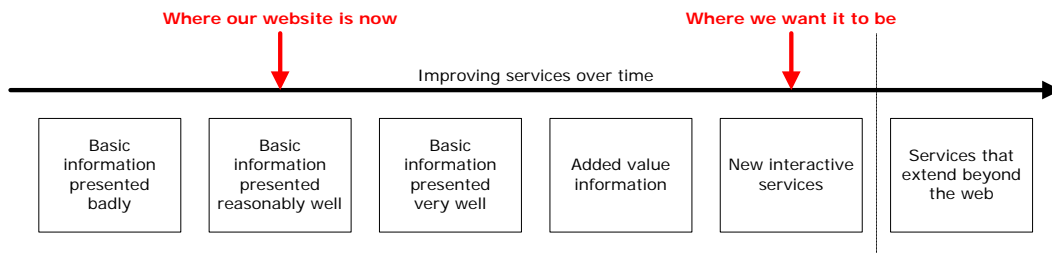
Improvements to the site and future service ideas fall into four broad groups:

- **Data services** – Improvements to existing services and new ways of presenting information: Better search engine; a more user-friendly display of Hansard with integrated video and audio; information organised by topic; consolidated information on Bills and Members; a calendar view of Parliament's business; easier access data on questions, EDMs, divisions and so on.
- **Help/Guides** – Simple, visual, step-by-step guides to democracy as a whole; Parliament's roles explained, in particular legislation and scrutiny; a revamped education website for teachers and children replacing the existing [www.explore.parliament.uk](http://www.explore.parliament.uk)
- **Interpretation/Editorial** – Background information and summaries written in a more 'newsy' way, starting with reports and Bills, moving on to key topics, key statements, and eventually major debates and divisions.

- **Participation** – eConsultations, ePetitions, and new tools to facilitate many-to-one not just one-to-many communication.

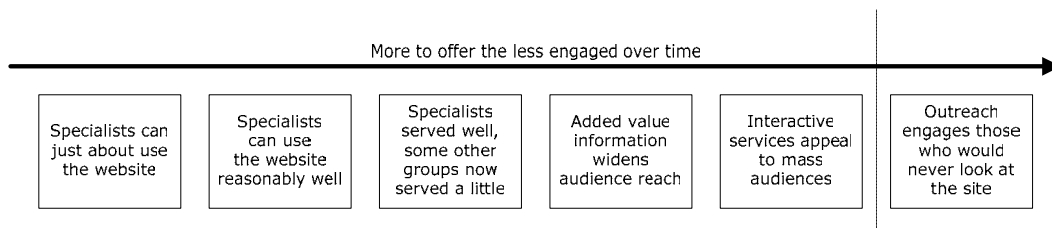
## Steps

Parliament is on a journey. When I started in October 2005 it was presenting an abundance of useful information but in an extremely basic and inaccessible way. The first step has been to improve the high-level structure of the website to at least help people access what is already there.



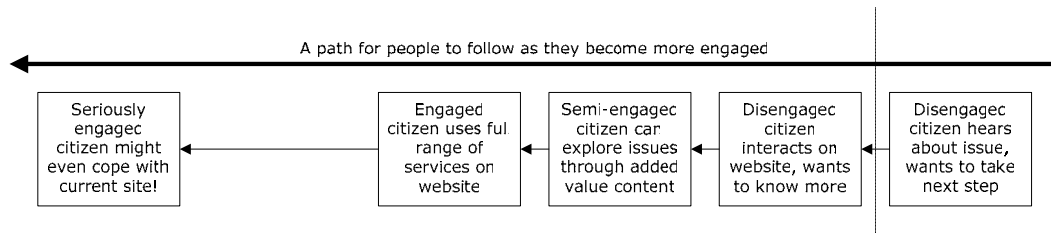
Parliament has a long way to catch up before it can present its core information well. It is reliant on a plethora of legacy systems and paper processes which do not lend themselves to online presentation. However, it is important that it builds from where it is now rather than seeking to jump ahead of itself. It is essential that it develops new services in a sustainable way.

It will be difficult to provide added value content without being able to draw on information that already exists, and without being able to create relationships with existing data. It will be difficult to offer interactive services without having the basic information available for people to reference.



As Parliament engages the wider public with its work, it must give people somewhere to go next. It must back up any interactive offerings and outreach work with more basic services. Parliament should not be launching interactive gimmicks to mass audiences before it has worked out the basics such as letting people identify and contact their MPs.

Parliament's outreach programme can only achieve so much without the tools and services people will expect to find as they seek to learn more. Parliament is on a journey, but more importantly it is seeking to take others on a journey. As Parliament expands its services outwards, it must be prepared for people coming the other way.



## Challenges

The greatest challenge to achieving these goals is to maintain the momentum for change in a traditional and slow-moving organisation. The governance arrangements on parliamentary projects tend to be complex and time consuming, and in my experience it takes far too long to manage the relationships around a piece of work at the expense of actually getting it done.

Having worked on websites at the BBC and Channel Four where big changes can happen very quickly, it can be deeply frustrating to see even the smallest change debated and discussed in detail before a decision can be made to start work.

The Internet Project is having to break new ground as Internet users expect fast progress. Parliament wants to radically change its website, but for the Project to succeed that radical change will have to start within the organisation itself. Building the site is the easiest part of the process; the difficulty will be in ensuring all the basic data is available, that added value content can be provided to make the website compelling to all users, and that channels are opened behind the website to make any interactivity meaningful.

The first steps have been difficult, the outcomes so far have been positive, but the next steps will be harder as the changes required to the way Parliament works become more significant. Over the last six months we have had to remove many real and perceived roadblocks. We have had to convince people that a successful website is primarily about communications not about technology, that it is possible to make a website colourful without dumbing down, and that designing the site from a user perspective is not at odds with meeting Parliament's objectives.

Over the next few months we must work out how to remove the rest of the obstacles to success. For Parliament to succeed with its Internet Project it must create a partnership with all groups within the organisation. It is on the verge of making this happen.



## Conclusions

Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Stephen Ward

Much of the early excitement about technologies transforming parliamentary institutions has proved to be hype. Yet, websites are arguably becoming one of parliaments' most important channels of communication especially given the continued decline of traditional media coverage. Their growing importance can also be seen in the rapid increase in visitors to parliamentary sites. Whilst the audience may still be a minority one and skewed towards the politically interested, websites do provide a window on parliamentary activity particularly for younger citizens. Yet, despite this growth, the consensus of research (& journalism) on Parliamentary-ICT strategies is one of disappointment. Parliaments are viewed as being cautious in their approach to new media technologies even compared to other parts of political world. Whilst there is general excitement in the Internet community about web 2.0 technologies and their potential for networking, decentralisation and interactivity, parliaments, for the most part, are still grappling with the problems brought in by the web 1.0 technologies. Indeed, the focus of parliamentary activity so far has generally been about the provision of information. Interactivity and user engagement have proved more problematic. This is not to say that innovations have not occurred. For instance, in our case study countries, we have seen the use of e-consultations (UK), e-petitioning (Scotland) and the AMELI system (France), all of which are good examples of innovation. However, it often appears that technology is being grafted onto existing structures and organisations and many innovations are hardly embedded into parliamentary infrastructures. In explaining this cautious approach our discussions highlighted several key factors:

- Tensions between different roles and audiences that parliaments serve—Officials are under pressure to provide for both politicians and the wider public. The objectives and information required are not always the same. How far should parliamentary sites be neutral information vehicles as opposed to representing the partisan struggles within parliaments?
- Traditional practices and culture—Whilst the world of the Internet and new media era is built around speed, instant access, and interactivity, most parliaments are not rooted in technological age and their decision making processes are slow. The parliamentary world has traditionally valued a slower, more reflective cycle of policymaking. Moreover the culture of politicians has grown-up around a face-to-face world of committees, meetings and debates rather than computers and virtual spaces.
- Fragmentation, lack of leadership and a collective voice. The countries examined here reveal a variety of organisational issues from those where there is simply lack of interest in ICTs through to those where officials are faced with day-to-day interference from politicians even on issues such as website design. Often the organisational management of ICT issues is fragmented between a myriad of committees and groups making progress slow and chains of command unclear (See Tinley this volume). Additionally, in some parliaments, particularly the more partisan, constituency-based systems, we find that there is no-one to speak for Parliament as a collective institution. Nor is there much of an element of compulsion on representatives. So, as we saw in the Slovenian case, even gathering basic standardised information from MPs can be problematic.

- Resources and infrastructure – As with many projects more innovative and advanced uses require the dedication of significant resources (staff and finances). However, it has often been difficult to demonstrate the clear benefits of investment in technology. In fact, often government technological projects have a poor reputation in terms of both implementation and costs and this can further strengthen the pre-existing mildly technophobic attitudes amongst decision makers.

Despite these broad similarities and common problems in developing ICT strategy across countries, our discussions also underlined the importance of systemic and institutional factors in shaping parliaments' approaches to new technologies. Differences in activity often result from the distinctive institutional and political environments or constitutional arrangements. Clearly, some of the newer parliaments (Scotland) have had a relative advantage in being able to incorporate technology more easily into their day-to-day work. A second clear distinction arose between constituency based first-past-the-post electoral systems and those operating party list systems. The former has seen the ICT agenda focus around the individual representative and their relationship with their constituents. Similarly, we can see differences in ICT approach between directly elected and appointed chambers such as the French Senate. Arguably the latter perhaps have more freedom because they are under less public scrutiny. Overall, whilst technology may present similar opportunities and problems the response of parliamentary institutions is likely to be determined by institutional norms and their wider political-systemic environments (see both Francoli and Zittel in this volume).

### **Expanding the Research Agenda**

Although some common stories have emerged from the research conducted so far and although the research agenda on parliaments has grown extensively over the past five or six years much of our knowledge is still patchy and arguably distorted. We have highlighted here several areas that require development for us to gain a deeper understanding of parliamentary activity in the ICT field:

- Extending the geographic focus – case studies are still fairly restricted to a North American and North European experience. Outside the developed world we have few studies, nor do we have much from relatively new democracies such as those in Eastern Europe – how far can parliaments in established democracies learn from new experiences and do such countries have advantages in incorporating and integrating new technologies?
- Increasing comparative research – as we noted above, it was apparent in our discussions that systemic shaping is important in understanding ICT usage within the parliamentary sphere. Yet most existing research has tended to focus on the technology or on single country cases rather than exploring systemic differences through comparative research.
- Using our existing theoretical knowledge—one of the initial objectives of the workshop was to try and bring together some of different approaches to parliaments and net and explore whether the divides mattered. Our discussions underlined the importance of: (1) the established legislative studies field to take seriously the impact of new technologies particularly given its increasing significance as both an information and communication tool; (2) the newer Internet studies discipline not to simply examine parliaments-ICT initiatives in a

vacuum, either forgetting or ignoring all we have discovered and learnt about parliamentary behaviour previously. In short, as Zittel contends here, it is worth trying to apply some of our existing theoretical ideas, for example, about the influence of electoral and party systems to the parliamentary-ICT research arena.

- Understanding parliament as collective institutions—existing research has tended to focus on MPs as individuals and, in particular, in constituency based systems on the public-representative nexus. As Norton notes in his paper still many areas of parliamentary work related to their scrutiny and policy-making functions that remain relatively unexplored.
- Understanding the public dimension—even though we have seen an interest public-representative relationship, in reality much of this has focussed on the representative rather than the represented (Coleman and Spiller, 2005). Lusoli's paper in this volume provides some evidence as a start point but we still know relatively little about how and why public visit parliamentary sites or how they use information on such sites. Nor is this simply an academic problem. Whilst some parliaments conduct detailed audience research and testing others have only patchy knowledge of their public audience.

By bringing together parliamentary officials and academics from the Internet and the legislative studies, the workshop established a number of key areas that need further research. The comparative approach of the workshop was also very useful in showing the importance of the institutional context of each parliament to understand better the way ICT have been implemented.