



Parliamentary Representation in the Internet Age: An Anglo Australian Comparison

ESRC E-Society Programme

New media technologies have been seen as providing opportunities to reinvigorate representative democracy and parliamentary institutions. Stephen Ward examined the impact of information communication technologies (ICTs) on parliamentary representation in the UK and Australia. The project focused on examining how far ICTs are being used by parliaments and parliamentarians, what use they are making of them and the impact of such use on representative parliamentary democracy in the UK and Australia..

Focusing on results collected in the UK, the research found that:

- Although there is evidence of Westminster and the Scottish Parliament introducing ICTs, progress is slow, piecemeal and lacking a political lead or extensive parliamentary input. However, there has been a slow but steady adoption of the web. A normalisation process is taking place whereby using email and websites is becoming an everyday part of MP's information toolkits.
- Third party representatives, such as the Liberal Democrats, were more likely to be active in using the Internet as a communication tool.
- MPs in more marginal constituencies were more active online, especially in areas of high connectivity.
- The growth of sites for individual MPs has been characterised by an approach whereby parties provide MPs and local parties with cheap template websites. As such, MPs' sites follow an increasingly professionalized, standardised approach providing little individualised information or interactive facilities.
- Traditional means of contacting political representatives (letters, telephone and face-to-face) still predominates. Contacting online is still largely limited to the politically engaged middle class. Young people are more likely to use email so email contact is likely to grow.
- Citizens often found MPs' sites boring and whilst supporting the idea of representatives being online, they could see no point personally in visiting their sites.

Background

It has become increasingly commonplace to talk of a crisis in parliamentary representation. Interest in politics has decreased and public trust and support of government has declined. Turnout at elections has gone down and this trend is set to continue resulting in concerns being raised as to the future of parliamentary legitimacy and government mandate.

It has been argued that institutions need to do some catching up with citizens, increasingly engaged with 'issues' rather than traditional political concerns. ICTs have been identified as one of the elements capable of assisting parliament in reconnecting with the public. The intention of the research conducted by Ward was to assess the impact of ICTs on parliamentary representation in the UK and Australia. For the purposes of this Briefing, findings relating to the UK experience will be discussed. More details of the Australian experience are available at the end of this Briefing.

The Project

The project had a number of objectives which included:

1. Establish how far new ICTs are being used by parliaments and parliamentarians.
2. Determine the most effective usage of new ICTs by parliaments and parliamentarians.
3. Assess the impact of new ICTs on representative democracy.

Analysis of the data collected from representatives and citizens helped to address these objectives.

Use of ICTs by parliaments and parliamentarians

Whilst the approach by Westminster has been somewhat piecemeal, it has produced several reports on ICT strategy and has experimented with online consultation. The Scottish Parliament has experimented with online petitioning and consultation and is creating its own e-democracy strategy. However, both parliaments' adoption of ICTs can be characterised by their lack of political lead or extensive parliamentary involvement.

Representatives in both Westminster and the Scottish Parliament are increasingly developing a web presence. The research suggests that there is a normalisation process at work in the sense that websites and email are increasingly becoming an everyday part of an MP's information toolkit.

Online activity by MPs appears to relate to the party which the MP represented. Minor parties and their representative's struggle for media coverage and so were more likely to capitalise on whatever other information tools are available to them.

The research found that personal factors were not significant in determining MPs' use of ICTs. Although those entering parliaments in elections from the late 1990s were likely to establish a web presence whatever the age or gender, it was the constituency environment which seems to have more bearing on MPs' online developments. MPs in more marginal constituencies were more active online, especially in areas where there were high levels of connectivity. This pattern was repeated at the last UK election, where marginal constituencies saw the highest levels of web activity. MPs in safe (mainly Labour) constituencies, often in traditional urban areas, were the least likely to use new ICTs. In addition, the research identified an incumbency factor at work with sitting MPs in the UK using ICTs more actively than challengers.

Effective usage of new ICTs by parliaments and parliamentarians.

Content analysis of representatives' sites indicated fairly standard patterns of adoption with most sites offering static information with very few participatory features. It appears that, generally, representatives' sites are largely *cyberbrochures*. However, two trends in site content have been highlighted by the research.

Firstly, there is an issue around what is described as *individualisation* versus *template* politics. In the UK there has been a growth of sites where representatives are provided with cheap template websites. Such a development, it is argued, ensures that MPs follow an increasingly professionalised but standardised approach to their site with news feeds from party HQ, party press releases, and party links with very little distinctive information. At the same time, such a development and the lack

of individualised websites, reduces the potential of the sites to be used as tools for dissent or for greater levels of personalisation.

Secondly, whilst overall there was minimal interactivity, a small group of innovators, mainly at Westminster, were experimenting with different styles of communication. Blogging has emerged as one innovative method together with a more ad hoc use of ICTs for formal consultation exercises. Several MPs have used email/websites and SMS to gather feedback on policy issues. In a couple of cases these have been developed into more localised online policy networks, providing specialist advice to MPs from the 'ground up'.

The research found that increasingly MPs are taking a much more sophisticated approach to managing their postbags and targeting communications to specific voters. MPs talked of scanning mail and using databases to divide mail on an issue basis so that they could send regularised and personalised communications to voters on issues they knew they had an interest in.

The impact of new ICTs on representative democracy.

The project has highlighted four major ICT-related challenges for representative systems that need to be addressed by parliaments and parliamentarians.

1. *Disaggregation and acceleration* - ICTs are particularly good at promoting flash mobilisation and protest and oppositional politics based around individual issues. In many ways ICTs accelerate trends towards single flash politics which were developing in the pre-internet age. For representatives ICTs appear to create more noise and chaos in which politicians have to aggregate and distinguish key issues.

2. *The amplification of voices of those already engaged and active in politics* - there is a danger that ICTs will merely perpetuate and in some cases exacerbate pre-existing participatory divisions.

3. *Fragmentation* - the amplification effect is then further underpinned by the fragmentation of online provision by representatives. The research noted that those in 'wired constituencies' (often middle class, urban and wealthy) have a better level of access and representation than those, who arguably, most require it.

4. *Raised expectations* evidence from the data collected from citizens suggests that the public have significant expectations of online activity from representatives and representative institutions but little understanding of the formal processes or restraints under which MPs operate. The risk is that ICTs will heighten dissatisfaction if representatives fail to respond or continue with existing practice.

Implications of the research

Representative democracy is in a state of flux and the long term direction of the representative system is not clear. The idea of a uniform model of representation built around societal deference and trust is unlikely to return. Parliaments and parliamentarians are doing more now than they ever have and ICTs may actually *increase* this workload. The research suggests that as political systems become more complex, the role of intermediaries in guiding citizens through the political maze becomes even more crucial. ICTs might provide increased openness, information and access but this places strains and pressures on the system of representation.

The research found that, to date, the introduction of ICTs to parliamentarians and in parliaments has been a relatively limited modernisation approach, largely trying to maintain existing practices and relations but in new formats. The research argues that without an effort to harness technologies and develop new ways of working, new styles of communication and wider political reform, the introduction of ICTs is unlikely to help representatives or satisfy the public.

Policy lessons and future research agenda

Evidence from the research suggests that currently parliaments and parliamentarians are lagging behind in harnessing ICTs to realise their full democratisation potential. With political leadership and parliamentary support, the potential remains for ICTs to provide:

1. More continuous representation - evidence from the research confirmed that most people have very little attachment to the political system apart from casting a vote every few years. ICTs offer a means to engage people more directly in debate and dialogue on a more regularised basis.

2. More informed policy makers - most policy consultations are conducted with the usual suspects on a relatively narrow range of interests. Yet, as some MPs identified in the research, within their own constituencies there are untapped policy experts who have 'ground level' experience of government policy. The development of online networks of expertise may be one-way of reaching such experts.

3. A more informed public - the emergence of an online third force sector providing greater information on parliament and its representatives may assist the public's knowledge, or at least stimulate some public debate about the role of parliaments and representatives.

Two key areas for future research have been identified by the project:

- *The upsurge of blogging and blog campaigns which have so far received little serious research in Europe.* The growth of blogging raises a range of interesting questions: how far this rash of citizen journalism is affecting the traditional news media and news cycles? Whether blogging heralds a new style of dialogue and relationship between citizens and political organisations? The extent to which they can have any role in policy debates? How far they will allow a platform for new voices to be heard or whether gradually blogging will be dominated by a smaller new media elite and more fundamentally whether blogs are merely a temporary phenomena?

The Australian Experience

Although there was quite considerable similarities in the research findings in both Australia and the UK, the differences that did emerge included:

- Australians are generally better informed than UK citizens about MPs and were slightly

more satisfied with their representatives. Possibly due to compulsory voting.

- Australians citizens were generally more enthusiastic and supportive of online government services. This could be explained by the fact that the Australian government was an early adopter of e-government and there are a greater level of online services and transactions available than in the UK.

- In Australia, MPs motivation for using online tools to engage with their constituents was driven by connectivity in the area. Contrary to the UK, MPs in marginal seats were no more likely to use the technologies than those in non-marginal seats.

Further Information

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The e-Society Programme

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and coordinated by the Department of Sociology at the University of York, the e-Society is a multidisciplinary programme of research that seeks to investigate how institutions, practices and behaviours are being changed by the technologies that constitute the digital age. This £5 million programme draws on the expertise of leading academics from across the UK. Launched in October 2003, the programme will run until the end of October 2007.

Further details of the projects in the programme can be found at
<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/e-society/>

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