

# LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE INTERNET

How European parliamentarians are adapting to the digital age

STEPHEN COLEMAN & BRIDIE NATHANSON





# About EPRI-Knowledge

Information Society Technologies for Parliamentarians

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# INTRODUCTION

## Setting the context

This is a period of profound change for European parliamentarians. Just as half a century ago television revolutionised the communication ecology of modern politics, the internet and other digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are now reshaping the way that parliamentarians do their jobs and the expectations that the public has of them.

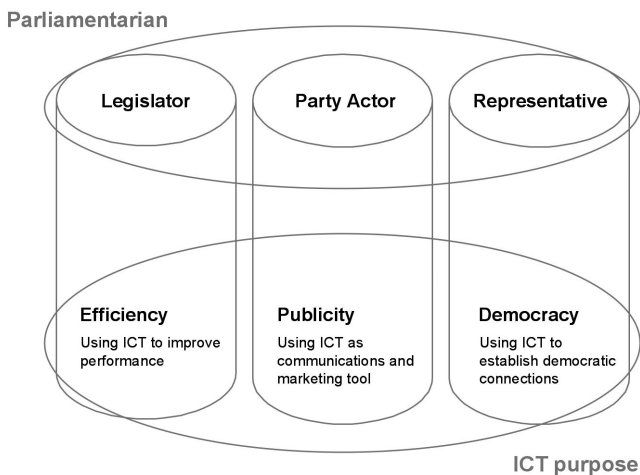
The aim of this study is to explore how members of parliament (MPs) in all the legislatures of the European Union are responding to the digital age. It is now almost a decade since most parliamentarians were first confronted by the existence of the internet and began their long, sometimes painful journey of adaptation – and sometimes resistance.

In the research reported here we have looked at how technology-friendly, early-adopter parliamentarians have embraced the internet. They are only a minority of parliamentarians in any assembly (Hoff, 2004), but they are highly significant because they set a trend for others. Historically, this has been the pattern: one or two technologically confident MPs will begin to use a word processor (in the 1980s), a modem (in the 1990s) or a blog (in the 2000s) and others then follow. Early adopters are not simply pioneers, but also trendsetters. This is the first cross-country European study of how they think about their role as e-parliamentarians. We hypothesise that the hopes and concerns they are articulating now will be adopted by significantly more parliamentarians in the next five to ten years.

In our research we have resisted the simplistic assumptions that MPs have a single role to play or that they use ICT for only one purpose. Parliamentarians have three main roles to perform. Firstly, they represent people. Some represent geographically-defined constituencies; others are elected as members of party lists. But all have a responsibility to be accountable to the needs, interests and values of those who elected them. Secondly, they are party actors. Most European MPs are the products of strong party systems. Unlike in the United States, for example, where parties are less centralised and powerful structures, the fortunes of European MPs are closely bound up with the success of the parties to which they belong. The party machines play a key role in shaping the policies advanced by their parliamentary representatives, as well as determining the career prospects of elected members. Thirdly, they are legislators. As parliamentarians, they are responsible for legitimising the democratic process by deliberating upon, revising and passing laws and holding the executive to account. These three roles are distinct, although for MPs they are all a part of a week's work.

We have also been concerned in this research to identify the *purposes* for which European MPs are using ICT. Simplistically, one might argue that they use them ‘because they’re there’ or ‘to get things done’, but this begs the question of what they think they gain specifically by moving from offline to online forms of communication. We argue in this paper that parliamentarians use ICT for three main purposes. The first purpose relates to efficiency. In modern societies there is a constant pressure to not simply perform working roles, but to do so with ever-increasing speed, inventiveness and competitive edge. Although parliamentarians are subjected to less managerial discipline than most working people, they are constantly trying to juggle their schedules in order to achieve more for less time, energy and money. In addition, they must be seen to respond positively to public and media expectations for them to keep up with the times. The second purpose for using ICT can be broadly classified as democratic. MPs have a unique job requirement: they are not only expected to serve the interests of the public that elected them, but to be accountable to citizens in a direct and transparent fashion. One can be a good lawyer by representing the interests of one’s client without paying attention to what he or she thinks about the details of the case in question. But MPs have a dual obligation to not only speak for people, but to speak with them. Establishing democratic connections with the public is a second key purpose for using ICT. Thirdly, ICT are used by MPs as marketing tools. Since the rise of mass broadcasting, MPs have been at the mercy of radio and television organisations which mediate between politicians and the public. The opportunity to establish more direct communication is very appealing and for many MPs the internet offers a path to disintermediated publicity.

The roles and purposes described above are represented in the following typology:



Much of the previous literature on parliamentarians and the internet has either failed to distinguish between these roles and purposes or else only examined certain roles and particular purposes. The aim of this paper is to examine how internet-friendly European parliamentarians are using ICT to perform their roles as representatives, party actors and legislators in the contexts of efficiency, democracy and publicity.

There now exists an extensive body of literature on how elected parliamentarians are using ICT. The bibliography at the end of this study, while by no means exhaustive, indicates the breadth and sophistication of this research. We have moved some way from early claims that the internet could be ignored as a passing fad or that it would do away with MPs and representative institutions by allowing every citizen to vote on every issue with the click of a mouse. Much of the more recent literature is normative and speculative and mainly addresses the United States, which has a non-parliamentary system of government. Little research has been conducted to chart and compare ICT use by European MPs and 'not much is known about the changes that the different uses of ICT have brought about in the work routines, roles, political agenda setting and decision-making processes in which MPs are involved' (Hoff et al, 2004: 4).

The existing literature addresses five major themes. Firstly, scholars have attempted to find out how and why MPs choose to use ICT. Chen's (2002a) study of the use of the internet by a sample of 1,321 elected representatives in Australia concluded that MPs prefer personal contact, the press and television advertising to using the internet as methods of reaching the public. Kernaghan *et al's* (2003) study of the use of ICT by Canada's federal members of parliament supported this finding.

In the most extensive study to date of European parliamentarians' use of ICT, Hoff and his colleagues (2004) conducted a survey of ICT use by MPs six European nations (Austria, Germany, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Portugal), as well as Scotland. In reviewing the research, Hoff noted the following key findings:

- nearly all MPs had access to PCs/laptops and access to the internet;
- most MPs are using email and the web, but newsgroups, discussion groups and personal homepages are only used by a minority;
- there is a north-south European divide concerning the type and frequency of ICT use by MPs; ICT are indispensable to northern European MPs, but not southern ones;
- most MPs consider other media (such as television, radio and the press) more important to them for political communication than the internet;



- previous experience and competence in using ICT are important determinants in explaining MPs' current use of, and attitudes towards, ICT.

These were not surprising findings. Perhaps more interesting was Hoff's study of the relationship between MPs' experience of using ICT and their belief in the democratic potential of the internet. He concluded that 'one tendency overshadowed all others: namely the fact that, generally speaking, the degree of involvement with ICT (use of, competence in and experience with) was of greater importance for the evaluation of the democratic potential of ICT than the other, more 'traditional' background factors' (Hoff, 2004: 23).

Other studies suggest that MPs are relatively uninterested in the democratic functions of ICT. On the basis of data from the Hoff study, Cardoso *et al.* (2004) concluded that parliamentarians are more interested in improving their internal communications and using the internet as a campaign tool than in increasing or improving communication between political elites and the public. While the use of intranets by parliamentarians is high, the use of ICT to connect with citizens is low. This conclusion is consistent with Zittel (2004) who argues that parliamentary systems do not provide sufficient incentives for the legislators to focus on their constituents and to structure a formative participatory representational process. Lusoli and Ward (2004b: 467) also found that the likely role of new media technologies will be to 'underscore and in some cases accelerate pre-existing trends in internal party organisation'.

Secondly, several scholars have looked at how ICT are changing party organising and campaigning. Gibson, Nixon and Ward's (2003) *Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet?* provides a balanced account of this subject. Some scholars believe that online campaigning can enhance opportunities for less resourced and more marginalised parties and movements (Foot and Schneider, 2002; Benoit and Benoit, 2000; Gibson and Ward, 1998), while others argue that there is an inexorable trend towards political 'normalisation' and that the internet is bound to replicate the communicative inequalities of earlier media (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Bimber and Davis, 2003).

Thirdly, some scholars have investigated ways in which ICT use affects the relationship between MPs and public servants. Malloy's study of how Canadian MPs communicate with government officials concludes that 'the telephone remains the most prevalent medium for communication with public servants, both by members and their staff' (Malloy, 2003: 53). Email is not widely in use and more sophisticated tools, such as online databases with transferable files, are hardly used at all. Malloy found that parliamentary staff are much more likely to use ICT than parliamentarians (Malloy, 2003: 53). In the power balance between politicians and public servants, Snellen (2002) claims that while in many countries unelected public servants are using ICT to actively engage interested parties in

consultations and negotiations, elected representatives are not participating. Moreover, in their relationship with public servants, ICT tend to weaken the power position of MPs and 'partly this has to do with the nature of ICT' (Snellen, 2002: 195). But Snellen suggests that monitoring technologies used for benchmarking could, in principle, stem this trend by strengthening the power of politicians to hold public servants to account.

Fourthly, several studies have examined online consultation experiments as a possible indicator of the future take up of this form of virtual public engagement. (Louvin and Alderdice, 2001; Coleman, 2004b; Macintosh *et al.*, 2003). Coleman argues that online parliamentary consultations in the UK have had six principal objectives:

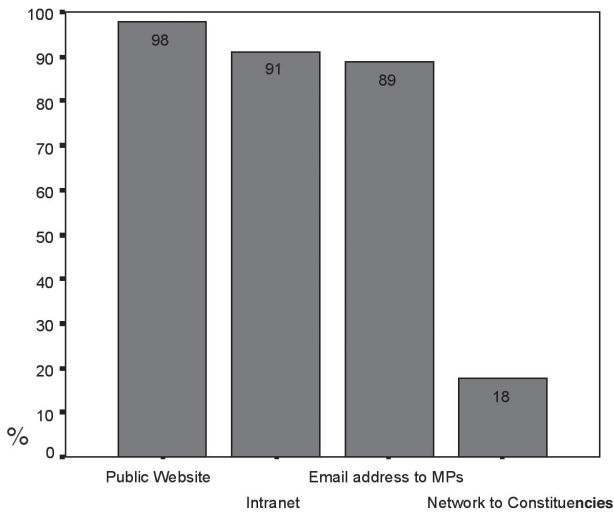
- to gather informed evidence from the public to help parliamentarians understand policy issues;
- to recruit citizens whose evidence might be unheard or neglected in the usual course of parliamentary evidence-taking;
- to enable participants to interact and learn from one another over an extended period of asynchronous discussion;
- to enable participants to raise aspects of policies under discussion that might not otherwise have been considered;
- to enable legislators to participate in the online discussion, raising questions and responding to citizens' comments, as time permits;
- to derive a fair, independent summary of views raised which can constitute official evidence to Parliament (Coleman, 2004b).

His study of two UK online parliamentary consultations concludes that they provided a space for inclusive public deliberation, involving people who would not normally have contacted parliament; and that they generated networks of interest, connecting people in similar positions who might otherwise not have met. But he was unable to find evidence to support the hypothesis that 'online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them' (Coleman, 2004b: 6). The UK House of Commons Modernisation Committee, in its recent report on Connecting Parliament to the Public, concluded that:

There have now been several experiments with on-line consultation on an ad hoc basis, both by select committees and by all-party groups. They have generally been successful and have proved effective as a way of engaging members of the public in the work that we do and of giving a voice to those who would otherwise be

excluded. We urge select committees and joint committees considering draft legislation to make on-line consultation a more regular aspect of their work (Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee, 2004: Paragraph 59).

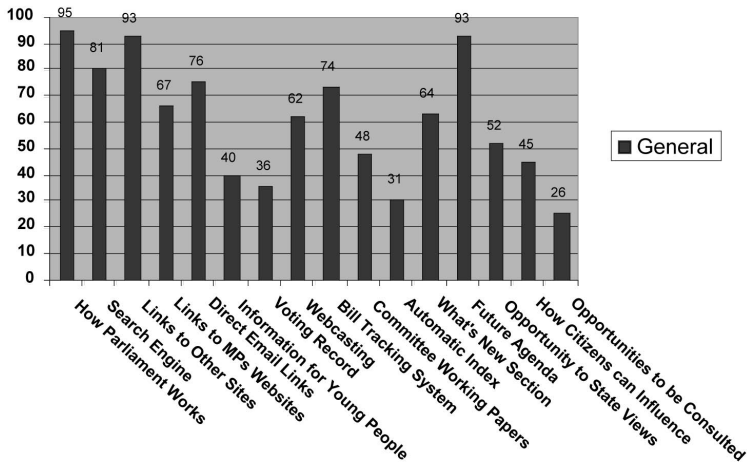
Fifthly, some studies have attempted to explore how ICT are reconfiguring parliamentary institutions and even changing the basis of democratic representation in political theory (Coleman, 1999; 2004a; 2005a). At the empirical level, Coleman has conducted a survey of 35 European parliaments (plus the European parliament) and this shows that there has been a high degree of ICT adoption.



Source: (Coleman, 2003)

Parliamentary web sites included a range of features. The overwhelming majority of parliamentary web sites possessed three key features: information about the parliament, future agendas for parliamentary sessions and links to other sites. Most had search engines (80%), direct email links (76%), bill-tracking systems (73%), links to MPs' sites (66%), a 'What's New' section (63%) and opportunities for the public to state their views (54%). But most of the parliamentary sites did not have Committee working papers (46%), information about how to participate (46%), special information for young people (41%), MPs' voting records (37%), an automatic index (32%) or opportunities for citizens to be consulted (27%).

## Content of Parliamentary Website



Source: (Coleman, 2003c)

The parliamentary officials who responded to Coleman's survey had sanguine views about the effects of ICT upon democracy. Over 90% of respondents agreed that ICT would lead to more public participation in the work of parliaments, widen the parliamentary agenda, create more interactive dialogue between MPs and the public and lead to more informed parliamentary decisions. 85% considered that citizens should be consulted online by parliamentarians. Research by Zittel (2004), Jones (2004) and Trechsel et al (2003) have all reported that representative institutions are slowly, but discernibly adapting to the internet.

At a theoretical level, there has been rather less attention given to the question of how ICT is reshaping the nature and scope of democratic representation. Coleman (2005a; 2005b) has attempted to show a clear relationship between the frustration of the public about how they are represented and ways of using interactive communication as a basis for a more direct form of representation (which he distinguishes from plebiscitary, direct democracy.) At a recent symposium on e-democracy, organised by the Oxford Internet Institute, a range of alternative models of e-democracy were discussed. (Coleman and Norris, 2004; 2005) The debate about the sort of democracy that might emerge from the digital age is still in its earliest stage.

# CHAPTER 1

## MPs as representatives

A principal function of parliamentarians is to represent the interests, preferences and values of the public. There is a long-standing debate about how far MPs should be directly accountable to the opinions of those who elect them. The famous Burkean view, largely incorporated into the currently-dominant Schumpeterian theory of representation, is that citizens have a right to elect representatives and throw them out at the next election, but not to tell them how to think or vote once they are elected. A more participatory conception of representation requires MPs to be in constant communication with their electors in order to be able to reflect their perspective as new issues for debate arise. Whichever end of the spectrum between substitution and mimesis representatives find themselves on, most would accept that ICT can help them to be more connected with those they are entrusted to represent.

### Efficiency

Most of our interviewees reported that they have more overall contact with citizens as a result of using ICT - especially email. In some cases, parliamentarians reported a decline in their (physical) postbag and phone calls received, while their overall contacts are rising.

*The barriers of writing are down (the envelope, stamp, mail box procedure). The number of letters, faxes or telephone calls I receive have gone down. (FI)*

This represents not just an increased frequency of contact with existing audiences (mainly constituents), but an increase in the number and type of people contacting them.

*More communications channels give you access to more people. (EL)*

*[ICT] ...helps you reach people you haven't been able to contact before. For example, on the effects of a law, the person who is affected will tell you. You would never have spoken to that person otherwise. (DK)*

*I now have contact with people outside my constituency or outside my party, or younger people - contact with people who would never show up physically to meet me. (EL)*

*I have more overall contact with people... and one contact can often lead to a deeper*

*dialogue: it starts with an email, and if interesting you arrange a meeting – if you're interested in the issues, you continue the contact. Many times I have obtained background information for my proposals or petitions in parliament like this. (SE)*

But concerns about email overload remains significant, even for some of the most e-friendly MPs.

*...people do not necessarily write to you because they have something very important to say, but more because they can. Your MP is just a click away... It's too easy to send an email to an MP. Even if it is not interesting you still have to take the time to download email and look at it. (DK)*

*The main drawback is overload. It's sometimes too much – you can't cope with all this contact, and all of the questions, and all the things you should do, and the spam problem – despite the parliament's spam filtering system... (SE)*

*There are no negatives if you know how to manage different tools and the information- you have to be able to manage your time and the information flow. (PT)*

*Emails have created a significant change: the reactivity time has gone down dramatically and you need to be more organized. (FR)*

*The main negative point is that you have too little time to answer all of your emails, do your work, update the website, and inform people about everything you're doing... People are expecting more from me than I can do. (NL)*

*I still need to read about 100 emails a day, despite the fact that my spam system has already taken 100 of them away. (SE)*

*Email makes the public feel you are more accessible: they want answers. (IE)*

*When my virtual assistant gives an out of office reply people sometimes get very angry, as if I should be sitting there waiting for every email. (DK)*

*Email is a promise that gets broken the moment when everybody starts using it. (AT)*

## Democracy

In most countries there is a widespread sense that politicians are distant and hard to reach. This belief, often based on a comparison between citizens' experience of trying to contact MPs in contrast with other services, such as shops, travel agencies or banks, leads to a prevalent sense that parliament is further away from the public than it should be in a healthy democracy.

Many MPs who use ICT feel that they are now easier to reach: more contactable and transparent on a daily basis.

*Some people said that they were surprised it was so easy to get in touch with their MP - in a very positive way, I feel I'm getting closer to people. It's a 2-way communication. (SE)*

*Even ordinary people send me emails. (BE)*

*Email makes the public feel you are more accessible: they want answers. (IE)*

We asked interviewees whether they felt that ICT was enabling the public to be better informed and, in turn, to better inform them.

*Probably the people who were well informed before are even better informed now. (LV)*

*Better informed people are getting in touch, in greater numbers. (UK)*

*Citizens are not necessarily better informed ... the people who write to you by email are not representative of the whole population. (AT)*

*Voters are more informed and engaged than before, because of the internet – and better information flows in society. (SE)*

*Are citizens more informed? Yes and no. Many people think they have a very clear image of what we are doing which can be quite far from reality. (DK)*

*You might think they are better informed, but you can't tell from their emails. They send emails because it is easy. (DK)*

*Many are better informed, because an hour after something happens, there is discussion about it on the net. (DK)*

Despite the ever-increasing amount of contact, and decreasing formality of contact with citizens, (through the use of email and now SMS), most representatives do not feel they have a better understanding of what the people they represent think or what their interests are.

*Voters have a better understanding of how the system works, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the MP has a better understanding of their voters' expectations. (DK)*

*People ask me to do things that are close to their lives –not really political issues. This influences your political work but doesn't necessarily mean I have a better understanding of them. (BE)*

*Perhaps I understand my constituents better because more people write emails - because it is easier compared to having to write a letter. (AT)*

*From email I have a better understanding of citizens, and from my web pages they have a better understanding of me. (SK)*

The impact of ICT on political participation remains ambiguous. Most parliamentarians indicated that they were in closer contact with the 'already-active' (e.g. party members or interest groups) and with those who could be considered latently or potentially active (people triggered into action by the convenience or anonymity of ICT), but they are less confident that ICT is significantly broadening participation, as opposed to deepening it among the already active. This leaves representatives with the impression that more people are communicating with them, but mainly because it is convenient to do so.

*People who have never contacted politicians before do so today by email, because it is easy, and it can be anonymous – although most people tell us their names. (SE)*

*People communicate more with MPs when something's wrong mainly because it is easier now than before. (DK)*

*The quantity of communications I receive is greater, but I am not always sure about the quality of the feedback. (SE)*

*People are not more engaged, it's just easier to contact your MP now. (DK)*

*Some are more engaged, yes - active civil groups on the net. A large group still doesn't feel that the Internet has anything to offer them. (DK)*



*People who are already participating have become more engaged, but I am not optimistic in general terms. (PT)*

*There is more engagement among those who use ICT - yes. (EL)*

Some representatives are using ICT to consult with the citizens they represent. This they do mainly through email, and sometimes through the use of specialised tools or activities (including online polls, discussion forums and organised online live debate on specific websites). Those who do consult with constituents online tend to have an ICT background and are generally more aware of the possibilities available to them. In general, parliamentarians consult citizens infrequently, usually on 'hot' local topics and when such consultations are organised for them (e.g by their party or parliament). Among those who do consult, it tends to be more with selected experts and specialists than with citizens in general.

Nonetheless, the MPs interviewed were overwhelmingly of the view that ICT opened up to them a more intimate connection with the citizens they represent. The informality of email, though often difficult to manage in terms of efficiency, enables MPs to feel closer to citizens. They now receive more personal responses from their citizens who, in turn, are flattered to receive email replies direct from their elected representatives.

*I feel I'm getting closer to people. (SE)*

*I feel closer to the citizens - maybe because it's faster to get to them now and easier for them to say what they need from me. (AT)*

*They know I am accessible, so I think it has changed [i.e. closeness to citizens] but again I think it's less a function of me, than people's access to a computer. (MEP)*

*I feel closer because a reaction to what happens comes from them much quicker and they can see what I am doing on my website. (DE)*

*Do I feel closer to citizens with ICT? Yes – email is still mail. For decades, people have been taking the time to write and it is a serious act for them, so I make the time to respond. When you take time to read them and take them seriously, the message is very important. I often use the substance of my mail to influence legislative actions - very often citizens are putting their finger precisely on the effects or drawbacks of the law. (FR)*

## Publicity

A potential benefit for representatives of having an online presence is what American political scientists have long referred to as the incumbency effect. By creating a relationship with citizens based upon who they are rather than which party they belong to there could be opportunities for MPs to win personal support that is independent of swings towards or away from their parties. Some of our interviewees were concerned to use their web presence to generate a personal following.

*To get in touch with a larger number of people I write short information notes on what I have achieved in the parliament and send it to a couple of people I know would be interested and I have them send it on to others... (DK)*

*I want to have a website where I can give more information about what I do. It gives the possibility to have another direct way to be in contact. (IT)*

*My home page helps them understand me. (DE)*

## CHAPTER 2

### MPs as party actors

Parties are the principal mediating channels between citizens and governing institutions. (Schattschneider, 1942; Lawson, 1980; Luther and Muller-Rommel, 2002) Traditionally, party organisation and loyalty have depended upon close, face-to-face ties, but increasingly parties are becoming more like virtual networks of political practice. ICT reduces the need for the endless physical meetings that have tended to characterise political life.

#### Efficiency

MPs have limited time, and so they welcome opportunities to maintain contact with their party centres and uniformity with party messages without having to physically attend meetings and briefings.

*I have better contacts with the party than before and more often. (CY)*

*In my relationship with the party, I have more contacts with members and officials - and we are getting better at coordinating the different national levels ... we are also getting more feedback. (DK)*

*It's easy to get information from the centre, especially when you don't live in the capital. (AT)*

*We are gradually evolving into having permanent conversations and contact with the party leadership in our region.... (LT)*

*You can communicate with 250 people at the same time - a great improvement from before when everything was done by telephone and costs were high. (SE)*

*The pattern of communication has obviously changed: for example for parts of the party that have to consult regularly, email has become the privileged means of communication because it is more efficient and less expensive. (LU)*

*It was much more difficult before to get information and answers from the party in Lisbon. (PT)*

*It was difficult to stay in regular contact with the party and discuss issues due to the size of the*

country. This has changed. (FI)

For most MPs, virtuality is not a substitute for physical contact with their political colleagues, but a supplement.

*Discussions now happen through an email list, but we still meet physically, especially the MPs. (FI)*

*20 % of party members do not use ICT, but many use the internet to find information. They still want to have a real debate with their MP and be satisfied by your answers. 80% of party members you never see at the meetings - they send me an email when they have a question or want to send in a contribution. (NL)*

Many MPs are attracted to the option of checking in with their party at any time of the day or night to find out the latest information.

*We are developing now a culture where you check your emails before going on the train and to check the home page for new information. (DK)*

*Now we all have Blackberries ..., when a topic comes up you are informed about what the party line is so you can communicate it yourself. (NL)*

But the flip side of this is an increased pressure upon party actors to know everything and always be 'on message.'

*Everybody expects you to know everything immediately and expect immediate response to their question. (DE)*

## Democracy

Parties are traditionally top-down, hierarchical organisations, characterised by what Michels (1911) called 'the iron law of oligarchy.' In theory, the more networked an organisation becomes, the more power flows horizontally and hitherto peripheral elements have opportunities to influence future direction. The extent to which this is welcomed by MPs depends upon their position in their parties; some are close to the central leadership and see ICT as a disruptive or destabilising force; others are more distant from the nucleus of power and welcome the democratising effects of networked communication.

*Party supporters are more engaged now; they can contact you so easily and know that they can express their views. (LV)*

*Democracy inside the party is better than before. (SV)*

*Before it was difficult for the party to discuss issues, outside of the capital – we had meetings only every second week. Now most of the discussion inside the party takes place through the email list. Everyone has the same opportunity to contribute – it increases party democracy. (FI)*

*The use of ICT has helped to increased democracy inside the party. (BE)*

*Most of the really interesting proposals from party members come through email. (CY)*

*You email something or give a call. You don't get together that often anymore... it's less hierarchical. (EE)*

*There is more participation inside the party now - because everybody has the possibility to contribute. (FI)*

*There is a lot of bottom-up communication within the Party now. (SE)*

Many of our interviewees reported that while ICT has a potential to engender increased internal party democracy, by encouraging more grass-roots inputs, this trend is being stifled by the use of ICT to centralise and control party organisations.

*The party is not using the potential benefits of ICT (reactivity, quickness etc) - it is still very hierarchical... The top takes the decision because it has doubts about bringing out the issues for discussion with the base - who supposedly do not have the experience or the educational level or knowledge to express a valid point of view. (FR)*

*No, I don't feel I have a better understanding of the member' interests - it's still the top that is deciding everything. I am pessimistic about the changes ICT could bring in the sense that it is a political will that is needed to change this. (FR)*

*The top of the party is more virtual than the bottom. (PL)*

Whereas parliamentarians as representatives had mixed feelings about whether the internet is creating a better informed public, as party actors they expressed the view that rank and file members are better informed now than before, not least because parties are getting better at making information rapidly available.

*Party members are better informed now. Before we had a party newspaper, but now we have more, better and permanent information possibilities. (PT)*

*As with everything in life, some are better informed, some are not. The problem is the amount of information available and the ability of the population to use ICT. (IT)*

*Party members can be better informed - if they read the website. (AT)*

Parties are not making much use of e-consultation methods, but informal dialogue about party policies is increasingly taking place via email.

*We exchange suggestions through emails: the emails are sent to everybody with questions and answers. (LV)*

*I use a contact list to send information to members at local level to get them involved in the primary process... we use email discussion groups: we send out information and people respond. (SE)*

*The Party ... has a database of experts and I consult them when I need information through email and discussions groups. (SV)*

## Publicity

It is the value of ICT to party actors for campaigning that tends to receive the greatest attention. For most MPs, ICT remain relevant as political marketing tools. But, in comparison with other marketing tools, MPs had a distinctly lukewarm reaction to online campaigning.

*We targeted youth with regular emails and electronic newsletters and launched a SMS campaign. (MA)*

*Gradually everybody is trying to make the tools interact, but still the most the important information goes through newspapers. (EL)*

*I use these technologies, but direct contact is more important (EL)*

*No, I didn't use ICT [in the last campaign]. It is being used increasingly, but is not particularly widespread or effective. (UK)*

*Even if journalists and politicians are the least trusted, it seems that a politician is more trusted when a journalist is reporting what he said. (DK)*

A few MPs described experimenting with mass mailing as a means to reach a larger audience. The success of using these tools was mixed: the response rates were very low and in some cases these emails were perceived to be spam.

Few MPs (or political scientists, for that matter) have attempted to estimate the overall impact of ICT on electoral outcomes, but there has been a general impression that effects are marginal and mainly worthwhile in terms of contact with certain previously unreached groups.

*We saw during election time that the number of hits increased on the personal and party sites. (LU)*

*People refer to things on my website, so I have a feeling that I can use it for campaigning. (SE)*

*Through the party website we send SMS on the day of the election. (IE)*

*At the last elections, the party gave the possibility for everybody to discuss their program with them: 20 000 reacted via email. (NL)*

*We opened our website to discussions... it was done because the media started focusing*

*on which parties used ICT or not ... it was interesting but not a decisive factor. (PT)*

*My party created a special website where we asked people for their input to help us formulate policy. (SE)*

A clear sense emerged from several of our interviewees' comments that they regarded interactive communication as a way of capturing information about potential voters rather than interacting with them. Applications such as discussion forums and chatrooms were regarded as a means to the end of collecting email addresses.

*I'd like maybe a chat room to have direct contact with different people whose addresses I don't have. (AT)*

*I could think about doing more structured chats and try to build up a contact list of emails and send out a news brief instead of having them [party members] having to ask for the information. (LU)*

*I want to collect the emails of the people who voted for me to get in touch with them ...– it's quicker and much cheaper. (EE)*

*For the next elections, I want to develop my homepage to give information, to chat and to get contact with internet users so I can share my ideas about what I want to do in parliament. (DE)*

*I would look into the possibilities of fundraising online. (LT)*



## CHAPTER 3

# MPs as legislators

It is to sit as members of the legislature that MPs stand for election. Here they are called upon to undertake their most demanding and consequential work and here, arguably, they are most in need of technical support to help them manage their time and keep up with the ever-expanding business before them. As noted in section 1, parliamentary institutions have been adapting to the presence of ICT. But how far is this supporting MPs in their legislative work?

### Efficiency

It is harder to be a legislator now than it was fifty years ago. The pace of life is faster. There are more issues to address and risks to tackle. The quantity of legislation to be voted on has increased. This has led to initiatives to modernise parliamentary infrastructures and processes and has resulted in the legislative role of MPs being the most e-enabled of the three main roles they have to perform.

The most obvious efficiency gain for MPs as legislators is the ease of online information-gathering. They now have much greater access to sources and experts than they did when most research had to be conducted within the walls of the parliamentary library.

*We don't use the library as before. Everything is on my laptop. (MT)*

*I don't need to stay in an obscure cellar to look up something written five years ago. (LU)*

*As a legislator, I am better informed now with ICT. You couldn't work today without the intranet or internet. At the parliament, paper doesn't really exist any more – everything is done through email... (LT)*

*It helps a lot when I need to look for arguments, information etc, or when I deal with special issues. (SE)*

*Without ICT I wouldn't be able to do my work today. (DE)*

*It is much easier to reach specialists, read articles etc. (NL)*

But with more information comes the burden of translating diverse arguments and data into knowledge. Deliberation requires time. The speeding up and technologising of parliamentary life sometimes leads MPs to feel as if they are drowning in an ocean of information. This raises questions about the impact of ICT on the quantity and quality of legislative output, as well as legislators' ability to balance interests.

*ICT have enabled me to be in touch with a wider range of subjects, but doesn't necessarily mean that I have a deeper understanding of them. (EE)*

*You 'Google' and become an instant expert. (MEP)*

*Everything is online, but this is a negative because everything is happening more quickly. If overnight a new initiative has been sent out by a member of my committee, you have to print, read and react (if it's an initiative of the opposition) immediately – but it's too fast. The responses are vague because you don't have the time to go into any depth. (DE)*

*I believe I am better informed, but you have to be critical of the source. (SE)*

*There is more information available on more topics, but not necessarily of quality. (EE)*

Some of our interviewees feared that the speed enabled by ICT was having a negative effect upon the quality of policy and legislation.

*It's going too fast, the laws go too quickly through chambers. The ease of ICT makes you believe that things have progressed because you can send easily, have hearings easily, make changes very easily. (DK)*

## Democracy

Almost all of our interviewees took the view that the use of ICT has had a positive impact on the ability of citizens and organisations to participate in the legislative process. Moreover, they feel that this has already led to increased input from individual citizens and interest groups. They reason that since more online information has become available and the parliamentary process has become more transparent, individuals and groups have reacted more readily to issues that interest them.

*I believe yes, there is more citizen input. We receive a lot of emails addressed to all MPs. (EE)*

*Input is easier. The website looks a lot like the intranet: you can find all documents, give input, write to MPs... everyday I find 50-60 emails that have been written by citizens to all MPs... I respond to those related to my activities. (IT)*

*It's easier to understand processes in parliament ... ICT are the most successful tools to make it open. (LV)*

*When something is debated [in Parliament] it causes a lot of public debates. We know about them immediately because we receive a lot of emails. (SE)*

*There is more input from citizens now ... People can see what's going on; that was not possible before. (PT)*

*There is more input because it is an open procedure... committees have the obligation to declare when and what will be debated and everybody is invited to present a proposal... according to the law all proposals have to be considered by members of committee... in some cases we get quite a lot of proposals from citizens. (LT)*

As well as informal, often unsolicited, input from the public, some legislators are now interacting with citizens in online consultations on specific policy inquiries or pieces of legislation. Several of our interviewees expressed scepticism about the likely utility and outcome of these consultations. In particular, concerns were raised about the possibly unrepresentative nature of the groups likely to contribute to such consultations.

*It's a good idea to involve everybody, but how do you deal with 100 conflicting ideas? (AT)*

*With online consultations, you don't know who is responding, whether it is your target group or not, and it is not representative of the population anyway. (LV)*

*People who use ICT are so few compared to traditional communications so I can't say how useful it is. (EL)*

*People using ICT are not representative of the population. (IT)*

There is a clear correlation between legislators' interest in using online consultation methods and the level of internet penetration in a particular country or region. Support for online consultations was much more common from northern European parliamentarians, such as those from Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the UK.

## Publicity

There was a general optimism amongst our interviewees that the internet is making the proceedings of parliaments more transparent.

*It's easier to understand the process in parliament now... it's open...ICT are the most successful tools to make it open. (LV)*

*There is more transparency - you can hear and read all debates etc on the web. (AT)*

# CONCLUSION

## Helping MPs to live with the internet

We have shown in this paper that MPs have three main roles to perform and that they use ICT for three principal purposes. As representatives of those who elect them, they benefit from contact with a wider range of citizens, but this sometimes feels overwhelming and they have yet to work out ways of dealing with the public's raised expectations for frequent and instant communication. As party actors, they are using ICT to become closer to organisational centres, but are sceptical about the willingness of political parties to decentralise power in the spirit of the network. Many MPs are using ICT for campaigning purposes, but interactive features are often exploited more as a means of capturing data about potential voters than as a channel for more conversational communication with the public. As legislators, MPs are probably best served by ICT. They find it easier than they did in the past to do research, but are often dubious about the quality of information they encounter and of the legislation that emerges from such fast-paced rhythm deliberation. The democratic benefits of ICT are being realised through the use of online consultations, although MPs have their doubts about the representative nature of much online input. In short, across all roles and purposes, internet-friendly MPs are engaging with the internet in a mixed spirit of hopeful experimentation and sceptical retreat.

When interviewees in our research were questioned about the tools or services to which they would like to have access, representatives were interested in better relationship-building tools, such as more interactive websites; consultation toolkits; better links with their constituency offices; party actors were overwhelmingly interested in obtaining tools which help with outreach to potential voters; and legislators wanted tools which increase their mobility inside parliament, as well as tools for managing their email and securing against spam.

## What ICTs parliamentarians want

If European MPs are to be supported in living more comfortably, as well as creatively, with the internet, there is a need to adopt some common principles and policy recommendations. We are not proposing here a uniform set of practices or standards for ICT use across all European parliaments. It was very clear from our research that social, political and cultural distinctions between different European countries (and regions) are crucially important determinants of MPs' attitudes to the internet. Nonetheless, we wish to argue that there are four overarching principles that could be usefully adopted by all parliaments and parliamentarians as they endeavour to come to terms with ICT.

### **1. MPs adapt to the use of ICT in different ways and at different speeds and parliamentary ICT policies should reflect this.**

From the earliest days, ICT have been adopted by some MPs and not by others. Some adopters have been mainly concerned to promote online consultations to support their legislative roles; others have been more interested in developing closer contacts with those they represent; and others still have been mainly concerned to campaign online. In offering ICT support to MPs, it should be recognised that some need help with simply sending and receiving their own emails, while others are more technologically advanced and should be supported in their experimentation and innovation. Indeed, parliaments should be much more rigorous about evaluating new practices. At the moment there is no body entrusted to share good practice between European parliaments, in the way that the Congress Online project has done in the USA. We would strongly urge that EPRI should take upon itself three future roles:

- providing tools and methods for training MPs and their staff in the best use of ICT for the purposes identified in this paper;
- evaluating experimentation and innovation in the use of ICT by European MPs;
- supporting parliaments in devising and comparing their ICT strategies.

### **2. Parliaments should make clear to citizens how they intend to use ICT.**

We would urge all European parliaments to adopt and publicise a set of principles clarifying how they propose to use ICT to become more internally effective and publicly accountable. The following charter of principles was adopted by the UK House of Commons

Information Committee in July 2002 and, although we do not assume that they are wholly applicable to all other national contexts, we do think that they serve as useful a model:

- A. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.
- B. The House is committed to using ICT to enhance the professionalism of Members, their staff and House staff in all aspects of parliamentary life.
- C. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.
- D. The House recognises the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.
- E. The House will develop and share good practice in the use of ICT by other parliamentary and governmental bodies both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and will work in collaboration with outside bodies. (Information House of Commons Select Committee, 2001: Paragraph 11)

### **3. The internet could potentially support a more direct system of democratic representation and this would strengthen rather than undermine representative democracy.**

Political relationships between citizens and the state are currently permeated by distance and disrespect, leaving democracy as an encounter between distrusting strangers. The democratic state needs to design ways of interacting with, listening to and learning from citizens, without this seeming like an empty or disingenuous gesture. The idea of democracy as a conversation involving many voices, rather than a well-rehearsed performance by the political elite, is highly appealing to the citizens of a post-deferential Europe. A more interactive democracy need not be an endless electronic referendum in which everyone votes on everything and representatives are redundant. There is no evidence of any appetite amongst Europeans – internet users and non-users alike – for direct democracy. But there is a considerable hunger for a more direct form of political representation in which ICTs are used to facilitate an ongoing relationship between individual citizens, their communities and elected representatives. The consequences of more direct representation, both in terms of the practicalities of MPs' workloads and the principles of social and political inclusion, need to be thought through at the highest level. The alternative to shaping such principles and practicalities is that they will unfold without input from MPs, leaving

out of account key players in the future of representative democracy.

#### **4. There is a need for parliaments to find out more about how the public wants MPs to use ICT.**

There has been too little research attention given to how European citizens are accessing their MPs online and how they would like MPs to use ICT. Some useful data are collected by Eurobarometer (which regularly asks Europeans whether they have interacted with politicians online), but there has been no systematic, cross-European survey of public attitudes to match Hoff *et al's* study of how European MPs are using ICT. Such a study would be helpful in determining the nature and degree of public demand for online contact with their elected representatives. It would also be useful to help citizens to understand the specific roles of their MPs and to use ICT responsibly in their efforts to be better represented.

Flowing from these overarching principles for future direction are a number of policy recommendations that we offer here for consideration by European parliamentarians. These are listed in accordance with our typology of roles discussed above.

### **Representative**

- A.** Parliamentarians should seek to manage public expectations by clarifying how they propose to use particular ICT applications (email, homepages, sms, blogs) and what citizens can expect from them in terms of content updating, response times and possible outcomes. By establishing such protocols, citizens will be less likely to impose their own individual standards on MPs' use of ICT and effective methods for dealing with unwanted spam email can be pursued more effectively.
- B.** Parliaments should design systems of real-time transparency so that citizens can monitor both parliamentary proceedings and the activities of their own representative.
- C.** MPs are mobile workers and should be supported by the latest mobile communication technologies. All MPs should have external connections to the parliamentary intranet via a range of devices. Parliaments should deal with incompatibilities between MPs' internal and external ICT usage.

### **Party actors**



- D.** Political parties should be encouraged to develop strategies for engaging and consulting with their members – and, possibly, their supporters. ICT could be a means to improve internal party democracy.
- E.** Parliamentarians should develop the capacity to narrowcast to target groups. The internet allows political communicators to move beyond the ‘one message for all’ approach of broadcasting. MPs should have a range of online channels for engaging with different target groups.

## Legislators

- F.** Parliaments should establish official online consultation forums which should be well-publicised. Online consultations should be run to help MPs draw upon public experience and/or expertise that can inform specific areas of policy and legislation.
- G.** Parliaments should use ICT to make their legislative and scrutiny functions more transparent. Citizens should be able to watch proceedings online, both live and archived, and also search for specific debates and issues.

Our conclusion from the research reported in this paper is to recognise the historically transitional moment of contemporary European democracy. In the 1960s television undoubtedly reconfigured the political landscape. A benefit of television was that it brought information about politics and politicians into people’s living rooms. At its best, television has been the focal point for national conversations about matters of great importance and for a symbolic gathering together of populations at moments of celebration, tragedy and decision. At its worst, though, television has accommodated its address to the idea of an inert audience with no appetite for depth or complexity. While television has brought political images closer to viewers, the images on offer have too often been received by citizens as remote, inaccessible and theatrical. There are two lessons to be learned from this for contemporary parliamentarians. The first is that communication technologies do not have lives of their own. They are what we make of them. Just as politicians made some efforts to shape television’s influence on politics (though in many cases far too late to be effective), so they now have a unique historical opportunity to shape the way that the internet interacts with politics. The second lesson is that an exciting opportunity exists to make a connection between the public’s widespread belief that politicians are not speaking with them or listening to them and the internet’s inherently interactive and polylogical characteristics. Making that connection both meaningful and sustainable could be one of the most important policies for twenty-first century European democracy.

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# APPENDIX

## Country Abbreviations

Austria	<b>AT</b>
Belgium	<b>BE</b>
Czech Republic	<b>CZ</b>
Cyprus	<b>CY</b>
Denmark	<b>DK</b>
Estonia	<b>EE</b>
France	<b>FR</b>
Finland	<b>FI</b>
Germany	<b>DE</b>
Greece	<b>EL</b>
Hungary	<b>HU</b>
Ireland	<b>IE</b>
Italy	<b>IT</b>
Latvia	<b>LV</b>
Lithuania	<b>LT</b>
Luxembourg	<b>LU</b>
Malta	<b>MT</b>
Netherlands	<b>NL</b>
Poland	<b>PL</b>
Portugal	<b>PT</b>
Slovakia	<b>SK</b>
Slovenia	<b>SI</b>
Spain	<b>ES</b>
Sweden	<b>SE</b>
United Kingdom	<b>UK</b>



This is a period of profound change for European parliamentarians. Just as half a century ago television revolutionised the communication ecology of modern politics, the internet and other digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are now reshaping the way that parliamentarians do their jobs and the expectations that the public has of them.

The aim of this study is to explore how members of parliament (MPs) in all the legislatures of the European Union are responding to the digital age. It is now almost a decade since most parliamentarians were first confronted by the existence of the internet and began their long, sometimes painful journey of adaptation – and sometimes resistance.

In the research reported here, Coleman and Nathanson look at how technology-friendly, early-adopter parliamentarians have embraced the internet. This is the first cross-country European study of how they think about their role as e-parliamentarians. As pioneers and trendsetters, the hopes and concerns articulated now by these early-adopters may well be expressed by significantly more parliamentarians in the next five to ten years.

Stephen Coleman is Cisco Professor of eDemocracy at the Oxford Internet Institute and Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford.

Bridie Nathanson is Director of Polpit Ltd., which undertakes research and strategy projects in the fields of e-democracy, e-governance and political communications.



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