

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?¹

Stephen Ward
University of Oxford

Wainer Lusoli
University of Chester

Rachel Gibson
University of Leicester

New media technologies, such as the internet and email, have been seen as providing opportunities to reinvigorate representative democracy and parliamentary institutions. This article examines the use of new technologies by Australian Members of Parliament (MPs). It looks at the growth and function of MPs' websites and assesses how far such technologies might facilitate changes in their electorate, party and parliamentary roles. We analyse what factors persuade MPs to move online and how they then use the technologies. The results indicate that while websites amongst legislators are growing, they are used primarily as supplementary, administrative tools. Overall, technological innovation in the Australian Parliament is still relatively rare and it appears there are systemic barriers that limit the potential of information communication technologies (ICTs) in the representative process.

Key words: *new technologies, internet, websites, members of parliament, ICT*

The internet's emergence into the Australian political sphere has led to debates about its potential to influence democratic practices and institutions. Such debates take place against the backdrop of what some commentators see as crisis for representative democracy or, at least, an apparent questioning of established democratic processes (Lawrence 2004; Sawyer and Zappala 2001). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that on occasions the internet has been portrayed as both a panacea and poison for Australian institutions (Young and Chen 2005). This article examines some of the potential for the internet in the context of the most traditional of representative institutions – the Parliament and more specifically the House of Representatives. Although there has been some discussion of Australian e-government

initiatives (Dugdale et al. 2005) and the notion of e-democracy (Bishop and Anderson 2004), there have been few empirical studies of the adaptation and adoption of new technologies by political institutions. Hence, we examine the extent and nature of internet use by Australian MPs, analysing how far new media technologies might help accelerate existing trends such as an increased constituency service role, or could facilitate a new more interactive, personalised and ongoing style of communication. We assess three areas of potential change: relations with constituents, relations with their parties and MPs' policy role. We ask what drives MPs to create and develop a web presence and what, if anything, MPs are seeking to achieve through their online presence?

MPs and the Potential of the Internet

An increasing body of knowledge points to the capacity of the internet to revive political representation and citizen engagement, and enhance the fair representation of citizens' interests and opinions. There is evidence in Australia that the internet is helping create a more inclusive media environment, favourable to the articulation of alternative preferences (Meikle 2002; Pickerill 2004). However, the jury's still out on whether the internet mobilises new participants or reinforces the existing political attitudes of young Australians (Vromen 2004). Somewhat surprisingly, considerably less empirical attention has been devoted to the main conduit of citizen representation: the elected representative. Limited evidence has been gathered in the US (Gulati 2004; Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004) and the UK (Ward and Lusoli 2005) on whether, and how, legislators use the internet, and what the consequences are for the representative nexus. Magarey (1999) and Chen (2002) are the only published studies of the use of the internet by the Australian Parliament and MPs, respectively. Furthermore, none of these studies are concerned with the wider consequences of information communication technologies (ICTs) on the complex functions and roles of MPs.

ICTs and the Role of MPs

Theoretically, it is possible that ICTs may facilitate change in the three major areas of the everyday work of legislators: as electorate representative; as party representative; and as national legislator.

In terms of electorate representation, there has been a well-documented rise in the local service role of MPs over the past three decades (Norton 1994; Norton and Wood 1993). In Australia, and many other liberal democracies, studies have found that MPs are devoting increasing time and staff resources to a constituency welfare role, sorting out the problems of constituents and, equally, acting as an advocate for their local area as a whole, promoting it both economically and politically (Studlar and McAllister 1996; Norris 2004; Heitshusen, Young and Wood 2005). The level of resources

devoted to such a service role varies according to the nature of the constituency e.g. profile of the electorate and the marginality of the seat.

The role of new technologies with respect to this increasing electorate role can be seen at two levels. At its most basic, this might simply involve the modernisation of existing practices, as technologies can be used to improve the professionalism and efficiency of the MP-electorate nexus. MPs can use email to communicate more quickly, cheaply and regularly with their electorate. Similarly, much more information can be made available via their websites about their background, policy interests, voting records and contact details. However, more innovatively, MPs could draw on the interactive elements of new media technologies to create a new style of personalised, accessible and on-going relationship with voters.

New communication technologies can also have consequences for the party role of MPs. While in many liberal, party-centred democracies, the last 20–30 years has seen increasing willingness of MPs to rebel or dissent against party positions (Bowler, Farrell and Katz 1998), in Australia party discipline has remained strong. Rebellion is almost unknown (Bennett 2004) as the party machines have become increasingly dominant. Arguably, the decentralist elements of new media technologies could eventually challenge this dominance and present new opportunities for individual representatives. Websites, at least theoretically, allow MPs to communicate more frequently, in more depth to a wider audience. Moreover, due to the unmediated nature of such communication flows, party elites may find it increasingly difficult to monitor and control such communication. Hence, websites provide MPs with a chance to personalise the party message and to air their own views; the many-to-many aspect of new media communication also allows MPs to network more easily with other party colleagues. Consequently, it has been suggested that parties may increasingly find that their national policy positions are scrutinised and challenged, and dissent fostered online more easily and quickly than previously (Ward, Gibson and Nixon 2003). Alternatively, however, parties could seek to channel or counter

the decentralising potential of internet communications through the use of guidelines and party templates, aimed at providing a consistent branded party message to voters through their representatives' sites.

Some MPs are increasingly focussed on developing a policy specialism and single-issue campaigns, thus trying to influence policy on narrow constituency issues or specialist national issues. One further aspect of this trend in specialism is the willingness of some representatives to move beyond local geographic interest into more cultural terrain including ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In the Australian context, Sawyer (2001) has pointed towards the increasing relevance and acceptance of minority representatives within the Senate articulating the agenda of specific groups such as aborigines, Asians, gays, women and young people. Particularly if they are few in number, ethnic MPs often become the national spokespersons for their minority groups (Zappala 1998).

ICTs can be seen as impacting on the policy and legislative role of MPs in a number of respects. Firstly, the amount of information available via the internet, digital databases and repositories makes it easier for ordinary backbench MPs to develop expertise and challenge government policy. Moreover, the internet offers increased possibilities for individual MPs to campaign around selected issues. Again, at one level, representatives may just provide more information on the policy issues and highlight their own parliamentary role via their websites. However, at a more sophisticated level, through the networking capabilities of new media, MPs could develop their own campaigns by gathering evidence and citizens' opinion online, engaging expert opinion through electronic consultation and encouraging and mobilising voters to support campaigns through signing e-petitions, lobbying email and letter writing campaigns.

Factors Shaping MPs' Responses to the Internet

Of course, none of the possibilities outlined above are predetermined. We are not arguing

here that technology alone drives change or that it will necessarily provide democratic benefits. The likely realisation of any of these possibilities depends on the complex interplay between the technological and social that informs MPs communication strategies. Constitutional, political and social frameworks will shape and, indeed, limit the potential of the internet. As with other forms of MPs behaviours, online activities are shaped by a combination of micro (personal), meso (institutional/organisational) and macro level (systemic) factors.

Micro Level: Personal Factors

1. Skills and attitudes – one obvious factor is the skills and background of MPs. Those with an interest or understanding of the technology are more likely to use the web. Hence, MPs with IT employment backgrounds or qualifications might be expected to be amongst the leaders or innovators with the technology. Chen's (2002) study of Australian elected representatives found the clearest indicator of the adoption of new technology for more advanced forms of community interaction appears to be the skill level of representatives. However, it need not necessarily be the MPs themselves that are central in this respect. An MP's staff can be crucial in pushing forward the use of ICTs since they are the ones that generally run and manage emails and websites on a day-to-day basis.
2. Socio-demographic characteristics – may also be important as a predictor of online activity. The majority of survey evidence suggests that the young to middle-aged, middle-class, male is the heaviest political user of the net (Norris 2001; Gibson and Ward 2003). Younger generations, in particular, are likely to be most IT literate having been educated and socialised in ICT usage. Hence, one might expect this to be reflected in Parliament with younger males of recent parliamentary cohorts likely to be the most active online.
3. Parliamentary position – MPs' online activities could also be defined by their particular

job within Parliament. One argument is that frontbenchers/ministers might have less incentive and time to use the internet. They can already refer the public to their own departmental websites for any policy information and statements.

Meso Level: Electorate and Party Factors

1. Marginality – intuitively one might assume that MPs in marginal seats would be more likely to develop a website as a permanent communication tool for campaigning and raising their profile within their electorate. The benefit of incumbency means that MPs could gain a long-term edge on their challengers through an online presence. MPs in marginal areas have a greater incentive to use any available communication tools to gain an advantage no matter how small. Although, there is little direct empirical Australian evidence on this point, elsewhere experiences have been mixed. In the UK, Jackson (2003) found that marginality made no difference to MPs creating a web presence. Yet, Ward and Lusoli (2005) found precisely the opposite – that MPs in marginal seats were more likely to have a web presence.
2. Technological profile of the electorate – where internet use is higher within an electorate, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that MPs will have a greater incentive to develop internet-based communication. The audience for any website should be higher and pressure to communicate via email from constituents is also likely to be greater. However, MPs might well make the calculation to adopt a website on the basis of their electorate's socio-demographic data, economic and educational profile, as this data is more readily available than internet penetration at this point. It is likely, therefore, given the profile of internet demographics, that MPs in urban areas, with larger middle class communities or, with significant numbers of students/young people, are more likely to adopt internet technologies for communication.
3. Party influences – a number of intertwined party-related factors can be empirically tested:
 - party culture – while parties of both left and right ideologically claim the net as their own (Ward, Gibson and Nixon 2003) those with more educated and active memberships might be more inclined to feel the need to endorse new media technologies. The symbolic value of embracing a 'progressive' technology can be seen in former ALP leader Mark Latham's early experiment with direct democracy using his website, as a 'response to the failure of current parliamentary practice' (Bishop, Kane and Patapan 2002:56).
 - Party resources – parties can provide practical resources for their representatives through advice and cheap provision of web software. They can provide templates or approved web designers that make it easier for representatives to adopt the technology.
 - Party incentives – it has been suggested that minor party representatives have more incentive to use unmediated ICTs to gain coverage they are often denied by the traditional media (Ward, Gibson and Nixon 2003). Certainly, analysis of the state and regional party sites in Australia underscored this point with the Australian Greens matching or even outstripping their major counterparts (Gibson and Ward 2003).

Macro Level: Systemic Influences

While this is not a directly comparative article, the importance of systemic influences, are worth noting. First, parliamentary culture, such as the history and norms of behaviour in different assemblies set the general context for ICT usage. Previous adaptation and experiences of using new communication technologies all help shape current perceptions of the benefits of investing in internet communication. Similarly, such norms and practices are also reflected in the formal resources available to MPs. This

includes allowances to employ staff, equipment budgets and IT training, all of which have an impact on the willingness to use ICTs. One might expect Australian federal legislators to have a comparative advantage since their parliament buildings are relatively modern and at least designed for the computer age. Magarey (1999), for instance, has argued that the Australian Parliament has relatively good reputation in regards to new technologies.

Secondly, Zittel (2003) notes the importance of constitutional factors in shaping technological adoption. His study suggests that individualised, presidentialised systems with single member constituencies might be more susceptible to technological development, since the individualisation of the system promotes incentives and competition to adopt new technologies. The Australian case might, therefore, be an interesting one as it is hybrid system which combines both the decentralised elements of federalism and single member constituencies with a strong system of party governance and party loyalties which arguably increase dependencies on the party and lowers the incentives for innovation with new ICTs.

Thirdly, one significant characteristic is the geography of Australia, particularly the 'tyranny of distance' faced by many Australian representatives. This, one might expect, would increase the incentives to adopt the technology. Given the internet's ability to reduce time and space barriers it offers a useful solution to some of the problems faced in reaching geographically isolated communities. Yet, alternatively, 'death of distance' arguments may be less pertinent where 'place' matters, and MPs need to be seen travelling around the constituency as a part of their representative function, especially in very large electorates (Capling and Nossal 2001).

Research Questions and Method

Within this framework, our research is guided by three sets of questions:

- The extent of MPs' activity online – how many MPs have sites and what is the pattern of growth? Has the 2004 election acted as a catalyst for expansion?
- The nature of MPs' online activity – what do MPs use their sites for? What types of information are provided? Are sites primarily concerned with supporting the constituency role of MPs or do they stress their legislative and party functions? How far are MPs exploiting the potential of the net to voice individual viewpoints and develop innovative or interactive activity?
- The patterns of MPs' online activity – what is the balance of factors (personal constituency, party, and systemic) which help determine the extent to which MPs develop a web presence and the purpose of their ICT use?

In order to answer these questions, we first surveyed and tracked MPs' websites for the Australian House of Representatives. A range of official and non-official sources were used to detect MPs' website addresses at two time points: December 2003 and January 2005. While the House of Representatives' website was used as an authoritative source of information on URLs, additional sources were used to verify its accuracy and completeness, such as political parties' websites and the main media websites. We also ran adhoc Google searches with syntax 'Name Surname, MP' for missing or ambiguous results.

In January 2004 valid sites were then analysed for features and content using a coding scheme developed by the authors, based on previous work by Gibson and Ward (2000) on election candidates' websites. The scheme includes coding items for information, engagement, presentation and links provided by the MPs on their websites. We also collected a range of individual level data on MPs, along with constituency level characteristics: age, gender, government position, educational background and use of ICTs; electorate marginality, internet penetration, and socio-demographic profile. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Australian representatives, at the federal and state levels, plus a number of interviews with parliamentary staff. These were mainly selected on the basis of their interest in, and involvement with, ICTs but also a more general interest in

Table 1. MPs Website Types

		<i>December 2003</i>		<i>January 2005</i>	
		<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>
Valid	Individual website	87	69	82	74
	Template party website	2.5	2	2	2
	Template other website	–	–	4.5	4
	Total valid URLs	89.5	71	88.5	80
Invalid	Broken link	4	3	1	1
	Not a proper website	5	4	2	2
	Not updated for over a year	1.5	1	3.5	3
	Under construction	–	–	4.5	4
	Total invalid URLs	10.5	8	11%	10
Total		100%	79	100%	90
% MPs with a valid site on all MPs		47%		54%	

Note: In January 2005 wave, the denominator is $n = 149$, as Mark Latham resigned his seat.

issues relating to democratic engagement. Although we do not present the findings here as a systematic analysis, it is useful to draw on legislators' direct experience to illustrate specific points from the content and predictors' analysis.

Results

In terms of sheer visibility, over half Australian MPs claim a presence in cyberspace. We found a slight growth between 2003 and 2005 (Table 1). While in 2003 we found 79 URLs for representative (out of 150), the count rose to 90 in 2005. However, a number of URLs – around 10% – led to invalid sites of different types: sites that did not exist, sites under construction and official ministerial sites. When one considers valid sites only, 47% of federal MPs had a site at the end of 2003, rising to 54% at the beginning of 2005. Given the earlier work by Chen (2002), this suggests an annual growth rate of around 6% per year since 2000.

Second, we note an interesting trait in terms of the type of valid sites. While in 2003, almost all MPs' sites were individual ones, by 2005 we detected a growth of website templates, both provided by the party (as in the case of the Nationals) and by developers who work with the party (as in the case of the Liberals). The numbers were, though, still relatively low. However,

the increase might indicate that the availability of templates might provide an easier entry point to the internet for legislators who are less keen on, or less used to, new media communications.

Finally, we looked at the nature of the growth, whether it is the new cohort of MPs entering the Parliament in October 2004 ($n = 22$) who have sparked the increase or the incumbents ($n = 127$) who have eventually succumbed to the necessity of a website. Somewhat surprisingly, 61% of incumbents actually have a site in 2005, vis-à-vis 14% of the new cohort. This can be explained partly by seasonality – newcomers need more than three months to set up their offices, let alone a website.

It is difficult to attribute the small surge of adoption rates following the 2004 election to the electoral contest, as both challengers and former members (both defeated incumbents and retired MPs) were less likely to have a website than average incumbents. It is, however, clear that returned incumbents were more likely to have set up a site in the year preceding the election. Therefore, the driver for website adoption might lie equally with routine and electoral representative dynamics. That is, winning incumbents might have built 'electronic capability' in view of the election, which is reflected in a substantial growth of their websites – from 48% in early 2003 to 61% in 2005. This provides currency for the hypothesis that ICTs add to the list of benefits

that incumbents have over challengers (Davis 1999). This does not mean, however, as the case of Green MP Michael Organ demonstrated, that a well designed, engaging and interactive website (<http://www.michaelorgan.org.au/>) is enough to guarantee re-election.

Function of MPs' Websites

Even at a cursory glance, MPs' websites varied in terms of quality and intent, ranging from online petitions, electoral enrolment and wealth of local information provided on Bruce Baird's website (<http://www.bruce-baird.com.au>) to the rather uninspiring brochure provided by Alexander Downer (<http://www.sa.liberal.org.au/downer/>).

Specifically, we coded for a range of information and engagement features, and the linking practice on the sites (Table 2). Results

are very similar across the two time points, and will be presented together unless they differ significantly. First, 'core' information on the MPs such as their biography and contact details was provided on virtually all websites (above 95%) in both 2003 and 2005. Additionally, information about the electorate was very common, present on approximately nine in ten sites. More specialised features detailing the MP's work were also prevalent returning the strong impression of a complex and engaging working life: local and national news (92%), often presented in the form of media releases (85% of the sites); and a section of the site detailing the legislator's parliamentary work (around 80%), for example, speaking in the chamber, working on a ministerial portfolio or as a member of a committee was common. Figures drop dramatically for other features. Detailed information on particular issues, national and local,

Table 2. Information, Engagement and Linkage Features on MPs Websites

		<i>December 2003</i> (% of websites)	<i>January 2005</i> (% of websites)
<i>Information</i>	Contact details	99	99
	MP biography	97	96
	Electorate / regional information	93	96
	Local and national news	93	91
	Press releases	84	86
	Information on Parliamentary work	81	76
	Information on issues / campaigns	45	22
	Information kits	40	43
	Result at last General Election	17	14
	MP meetings information	7	7
	Online MP diary	1	2
Frequently asked questions	4	7	
<i>Engagement</i>	E-mail contact	97	95
	Online surveys / polls	39	40
	E-mail newsletter sign-on	19	20
	Online recruitment, join, donate	9	14
	E-campaigning	7	14
	Online meetings	1	–
	Discussion board / chat room	–	1
<i>Links</i>	Links to government departments	84	83
	Links to party	87	79
	Links to the HoR	70	76
	Links to constituency sites	72	64
	Links to pressure groups	36	32
	Links to the media	36	21
	Links to other MPs	32	20
		<i>n</i> = 71	<i>n</i> = 80

was presented on 45% of the sites (only 22% in 2005),² while other services such as 'information kits' was posted on about 40% of the sites. Information concerning face-to-face activities is much less common. About one in fifteen websites reports information on public and standing meetings, and a trivial number the MPs diary and whereabouts. Although it was not coded as a feature, a number of sites included an 'achievement' section, whereby the MP listed in detail the funding they have attracted to the constituency. The sums reported were in some cases considerable (see Robert Baldwin's site, <http://www.patersononline.com>), while the captions invariably stress the capacity of the MP to work 'effectively' and 'getting on with the job' – in economic terms – for the welfare of the electorate. Overall, results for the information items suggest that Australian MPs' websites are broadly oriented towards both the electorate and the media, addressing large numbers of people at once, though information which might foster increased citizen engagement is far less common.

We then considered those engagement features that allow the user to talk-back or interact directly with the MP. For all MPs, *engagement* items score much lower than *information* items. In general, email contact from the site is nearly universal; only 3% in 2003 and 5% in 2005 do not include an email address on their internet website. Online surveys and polls, where the MP sets the questions, are also relatively common, present on two in five websites. Below these one-to-one communications, frequencies decrease steeply. Surprisingly, only one in five sites provide a subscription email newsletter from the MP. Such a feature is usually low-cost and low-maintenance for the MP, and is useful to convey personal messages, party news and general information to hundreds of constituents. A minority of sites include features that might support organisational activity, such as the chance to join the MP's party and/or donate (9% in 2003), and campaign or otherwise help the candidate (7% in 2003). Both figures, however, rise to 14% in 2005, possibly as a consequence of the electoral campaign.

Finally, those features embodying the much-vaunted internet interactivity and many-to-

many communication, such as online meetings with the MP and discussion boards, are virtually absent from the representative websphere (less than 1% of the sites on average), a finding that clearly runs contrary to our expectations from 'the tyranny of distance'. Australia is also apparently immune to the political weblog phenomenon which seems to have pervaded other countries, especially the US and the UK. Although some MPs have flirted with the idea of an online diary (Malcolm Turnbull, <http://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/>), or a soapbox for constituents to express their views (David Tollner, <http://www.tollner.net/>).

Overall, as was noted above, the variability among sites was very low in the Australian context. Australian MPs offered a consistent and widespread, albeit not very interactive, repertoire of services for their constituents. This perhaps came from seeing their sites as the 'portal to government' for citizens as a number of MPs remarked during interviews. The wording of the links and features offered on the websites returned the strong impression of 'service' to the community: they describe a range of services the MP provide to their constituents, which are neither necessarily 'functional' nor strictly 'political'; congratulation messages for a range of life milestones; short-listing for community awards; and flags for schools. Wayne Swan, for instance went to the length of providing price comparisons at local supermarkets, to assist a campaign to control price inflation (<http://www.swanmp.org/>). The website of Tanya Plibersek (<http://tanyaplibersek.com/>), for example, was truly a portal to national politics, with little evident connection to the electorate.

MPs tend to have websites which are neat, professional and frequently updated (Table 3). However, while 55% of the sites were updated at least weekly in 2003, the figure decreased to 46% in 2005, which to some extent may be a symptom of post-election fatigue. Finally, we found that similar amounts of information and engagement features are provided on the websites of new MPs and incumbents, and that incumbents' sites set up at different times (e.g. before and after December 2003) are also very similar in that respect.

Table 3. Frequency of Website Update

	December 2003 (% of websites)	January 2005 (% of websites)
6–12 months	4	4
2–6 months	17	15
Monthly	6	9
Fortnightly	13	16
Weekly	29	17
1–3 days	26	29
No way to tell	4	10
Total	100%	100%

Explanatory Factors

In line with our interpretative framework we examined a range of personal/individual, party and electoral environment, and systemic factors to understand why MPs create a web presence. In terms of personal factors, data is available on gender, age, parliamentary seniority, front and backbench position, and familiarity with the internet.³ In terms of political organisational and electoral context dynamics, we considered the impact of electoral marginality,⁴ electorate internet penetration,⁵ and MPs political party as influences on the likelihood of an MP developing a website.

Table 4 shows that youth and familiarity with the internet are most important in determining whether an Australian MP goes online. Owners of very sophisticated sites, generally have above-average IT skills from previous careers as media of information professionals before entering Parliament⁶. Data also records a slight gender bias which favour male MPs (49%) compared to female representatives (42%). Resource-rich frontbenchers also prevail online over time-rich backbenchers, since having a ministerial position seems to increase the chances of MPs having a website. Interestingly, and in line with the latter finding, longer-serving MPs appear to be quicker off the blocks than newcomers.

As for the electoral/political context, the findings on marginality are the most striking. MPs for safe electorates are slightly more likely to have a website than MPs in marginal constituency. On average, MPs with websites enjoy a majority approximately one per cent larger

than MPs without an online presence (10.1% vs. 9.2%). This is perhaps related to the existence of compulsory voting which removes the possible burden to focus on mobilising voters to turnout and instead focus just on constituency politics and service. In terms of internet penetration, there is variance across electoral districts although the evidence is not overwhelming that MPs are driven by the potential size of their 'audience' in taking to the Web. The average internet penetration in electorates where MPs have websites is 37.2%, vis-à-vis 36.4% for electorates where the MPs do not have a site. Finally, party can matter as MPs for the Nationals have a much higher than average probability of having a website than MPs for the main parties.

Lastly we move to more speculative ground about the importance of the broader systemic and parliamentary institutional factors in determining MPs online strategies. Overall, both individual and meso-level variables are important for understanding the enthusiasm observed among MPs in adopting the new technologies. Firstly, the party system and the culture of party discipline may well matter. While legislators adopt largely personal sites not directly provided by the party unlike in Britain, and more like the United States (although some Liberals and Nationals use a common template), the rigorous party discipline of the Australian system, and the importance of incumbency is reflected online, mostly in the willing adoption on the part of MPs of neat, functional sites which do the party the least possible damage.

In terms of the effects of federalism, it is not evident that the wider electoral platform of the

Table 4. Personal Factors and Website Adoption

		<i>MPs with sites</i>	<i>Difference from average</i>
Gender	Female	42%	-5%
	Male	49%	+2%
Age	Years	52	-2 years
Internet familiarity	Low	29%	-18%
	Medium	45%	-2%
	High	50%	+3%
Ministerial position	Yes	52%	+ 5%
Seniority	Years	8.5	-0.5 years

Table 5. Parties, States and Website Adoption

		<i>MPs with websites (%)</i>	<i>Difference from average (%)</i>
<i>Parties</i>	Liberal	43	-4
	ALP	45	-2
	Nationals	69	+22
	Other	75	+28
<i>States</i>	NSW	52	+5
	ACT	50	+3
	VIC	46	-1
	QLD	44	-3
	SA	58	+11
	WA	13	-37
	TS	80	+33
	NT	100	+53

decentralised system necessarily encourages technological innovation. More than 'innovators' there are 'laggards' on the uptake scale of websites at state level. MPs from the eastern states NSW, ACT, Victoria and Queensland display average rates of adoption, while those from Tasmania and the Northern Territory are much keener, and legislators from WA are much less inclined to set up a virtual presence (see Table 5). The greater enthusiasm among MPs from the NT and Tasmania does suggest the tyranny of distance argument has merit. However, results for WA challenge the universality of this interpretation. Closer observation of the size of the electorate in square kilometres and the likelihood of the MP having a site – on either end of the distribution i.e. those with very small inner urban electorates vs. very large, mainly rural (but sometimes provincial)

electorates – revealed no significant effects. The 'distance' from Canberra and the relative weight of internet penetration may thus be more important than the simple distance between the MPs and their constituents.

Conclusions: The Vicious Circle of Inaction?

At one level, this study indicates significant and growing parliamentary web activity. Increasingly, email and the internet are becoming a normalised part of political life and a useful means of breaking down geographical boundaries and distance between legislators and citizens. However, much of this online activity is simply an extension of MPs' offline presence. Generally, websites and email are used to supplement their constituency and policy roles.

Although their websites are, to some extent, a more personalised form of representation, they are not independent policy platforms. Much of the information is rather bland and somewhat apolitical in nature. There is little to suggest that MPs are seeking to use new ICTs to create new interactive dialogues or relationships with voters. Nor is there much to suggest that representatives see ICTs as having any wider role in reshaping parliamentary democracy. Currently, innovators and innovations are scarce in the Australian parliamentary environment. Indeed, it would appear that few MPs have much of an internet strategy. At best, the web and email fulfil an administrative modernisation function where ICTs are primarily about the representation of MPs to voters rather than vice-versa. This underlines our earlier point that the existence of technology by itself does not necessarily change the motive for, or interest in, increasing democratic engagement.

Despite our initial expectations of greater activity in the Australian context, compared to some other liberal democracies, our research highlights significant barriers to greater internet activity and creativity from representatives. While some of these hurdles apply to legislators internationally, many seem heightened by specific Australian factors. Three, in particular, are worth underlining:

- Institutional leadership – as a number of studies have shown key individual innovators and entrepreneurs along with institutional policy can drag the agenda forward and act as key drivers (Ward and Lusoli 2005). The Australian Parliament currently seems to lack both individual internet entrepreneurs and an institutional e-democracy framework. Paradoxically, one possible reason is that the Australian Parliament, due to its relatively good facilities, lacked an institutional push to modernise again in the 1990s with the advent of the internet.
- Electoral and party system limitations – in many systems, elections are seen as a driver for web activity and experiments are particularly driven by the need to mobilise supporters and encourage people to turnout. This exists in the Australian scenario but there is

not the same urgency, since compulsory voting largely ensures high turnout levels. Moreover, the intensive party discipline nullifies any creativity and certainly there are fewer incentives to operate innovatively or to use websites to develop personalised positions as there are in some countries.

- The wrong sort of technology for the wrong sort of audience – there is a widespread belief amongst political elites that there is limited demand for online politics. This maybe true, although presently there is little hard evidence to support the claim one way or another. Perhaps more significantly, the internet does not allow politicians to reach the voters they need or want to. People are unlikely to visit if they lack interest or are unfavourably disposed to politicians. As a result, from a politicians' perspective, websites are relatively crude tools for reaching their electorate. By contrast, email and voter databases offer a better means of targeting key groups of voters. While this problem is not limited to Australia, it is underpinned by the traditional, some would argue, macho culture of Australian politics and the need for politicians to be seen in the flesh. There appears to be a greater reluctance to forgo the rough and tumble of real world or face-to-face politics for its virtual form.

In combination, the factors outlined above mean that many representatives tend to calculate that there are few real benefits to internet innovation. This has, for the time being at least, created a vicious rather than virtuous circle where politicians do little online, the public, therefore, sees little incentive to use the web in relation to Parliament, meaning in turn that politicians are then under little pressure to act.⁷ Until this circle is broken, the main impact of the internet is likely to be felt elsewhere in Australian politics, most likely through the alternative do-it-yourself politics of social movement and flash protest campaigns.

Endnotes

1. The authors acknowledge the support of the UK ESRC's e-Society programme – Award

no. RES-335-25-0029. We also thank Clive Bean and colleagues for making available the Australian Candidate Study and the Australian Social Science Data Archive for advising on, and making available, Australian data on electorate marginality. For data on MPs' biographies we are grateful to Sarah Miskin, of the Australian Department of the Parliamentary Library.

2. The issue of the privatisation of Telstra might have inflated the figure in 2003.

3. Internet familiarity is measured by frequency of internet use (five point scale) during the last election for information/news by a sample of incumbents and challenger candidates who eventually won the seat (Australian Candidates Study, Question B8). The scale was collapsed to three values (high, medium, low) to make it more easily interpretable.

4. Majority (or marginality) is calculated for the winning party after second preference votes are added, i.e. as the winning margin on total electorate population minus 50%.

5. Internet penetration in Australia is based on census data, and indicates individual access to the internet in the week before the census night.

6. Michael Organ MP, interview with the authors, 15 June 2004, Canberra.

7. For the idea of vicious circles of non-issues see Lowe, P., Clark, J., Seymour, S. and N. Ward. 1997. *Moralising the Environment: Countryside Change, Farming and Pollution*, London: UCL Press.

References

- Bennett, S. 2004. *MPs who have Crossed the Floor*. Unpublished manuscript. Canberra: Information and Research Services, Department of the Parliamentary Library.
- Bishop, P. and L. Anderson. 2004. *E-government to E-democracy: High Tech Solutions to No Tech Problems*. Paper presented to Australian Electronic Governance Conference, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 14–15 April.
- Bishop, P., J. Kane and H. Patapan. 2002. 'E-democracy: Technological Challenges to Democratic Theory.' *Australasia Parliamentary Review* 17(2): 55–68.
- Bowler, S., D.M. Farrell and R.S. Katz, eds. 1998. *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Capling, A. and K.R. Nossal. 2001. 'Death of Distance or Tyranny of Distance? The Internet, Deteritorialisation, and the Anti-globalization Movement in Australia.' *Pacific Review* 14(3): 443–465.
- Chen, P. 2002. *Australian Elected Representatives' Use of New Media Technologies 2002*. Melbourne: Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne.
- Davis, R. 1999. *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dugdale, A., A. Daly, F. Papandrea and M. Maley. 2005. 'Accessing E-government: Challenges for Citizens and Organizations.' *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 71(1): 109–118.
- Gibson, R.K. and S. Ward. 2003. 'Letting the Daylight In? Australian Parties' Use of the World Wide Web at the State and Territory Level.' In *Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet*, eds R.K. Gibson, P. Nixon and S. Ward. London: Routledge, 139–160.
- Gibson, R.K. and S. Ward. 2002. 'Virtual Campaigning: Australian Parties and the Impact of the Internet.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37(1): 99–130.
- Gibson, R.K. and S. Ward. 2000. 'A Proposed Methodology for Studying the Function and Effectiveness of Party and Candidate Websites.' *Social Science Computer Review* 18(3): 301–319.
- Gibson, R.K., W. Lusoli and S. Ward. 2002. *UK Political Participation Online – The Public Response. A Survey of Citizens' Political Activity via the Internet*. Salford: ESRC Report. URL: <www.esri.salford.ac.uk/ESRCProject/output.html>.
- Gulati, G.J. 2004. Members of Congress and Presentation of Self on the World Wide Web. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9(1): 22–40.
- Heitshusen, V., G. Young and D.M. Wood. 2005. 'Electoral Context and MP Constituency Focus in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.' *American Journal of Political Science* 49(1): 32–45.
- Jackson, N. 2003. 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity.' *Journal of Public Affairs* 3(2): 124–137.

- Lawrence, C. 2004. *The Withering of Australia Democracy*. URL: <www.carmenlawrence.com>.
- Lipinski, D. and G. Neddenriep. 2004. 'Using "New" Media to Get "Old" Media Coverage.' *Harvard Journal of Press/Politics* 9(1): 7–21.
- Magarey, K. 1999. 'Parliament in the Age of the Internet.' *Parliamentary Affairs* 52(3): 405–428.
- Meikle, G. 2002. *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. Annandale: Pluto Press Australia.
- Norris, P. 2004. *Are Australian MPs in Touch with Constituents?* URL: <<http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/Citizenship.htm>>.
- Norris, P. 2001. *Digital Divide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, P. 1994. 'The Growth of the Constituency Role of the MP.' *Parliamentary Affairs* 47(4): 705–720.
- Norton, P. and D. Wood. 1993. *Back from Westminster*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.
- Pickerill, J. 2004. 'Rethinking Political Participation: Experiments in Internet Activism in Australia and Britain.' In *Electronic Democracy Mobilisation, Organisation and Participation via New ICTs*, eds R.K. Gibson, A. Rommele and S. Ward. London: Routledge, 170–193.
- Sawer, M. 2001. 'Representing Trees, Acres, Voters and Non-voters: Concepts of Parliamentary Representation in Australia.' In *Speaking for the People: Representation in Australian Politics*, eds M. Sawer and G. Zappala, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 36–63.
- Sawer, M. and G. Zappala, eds. 2001. *Speaking for the People: Representation in Australian Politics*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Studlar, D.T. and I. McAllister. 1996. 'Constituency Activity and Representational Roles among Australian Legislators.' *The Journal of Politics* 58(1): 69–90.
- Vromen, A. 2004. 'GenerationX' Retrieving Net-based Information: Political Participation in Practice? Paper presented at the Australian Electronic Governance Conference, Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 14–15 April, 2004.
- Ward, S. and W. Lusoli. 2005. 'From Weird to Wired': MPs, The Internet and Representative Politics in the UK.' *Journal of Legislative Studies* 11(3): 1–25.
- Ward, S., R.K. Gibson and P. Nixon. 2003. 'Parties and the Internet: An Overview.' In *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* eds R.K. Gibson, P. Nixon and S. Ward. London: Routledge, 9–37.
- Young, S. and P. Chen. 2005. 'Downloading Democracy'. *The Age*, 15 January. URL: <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2005/01/12/1105423548673.html>>.
- Zappalà, G. 1998. 'The Micro-politics of Immigration: Service Responsiveness in an Australian "Ethnic Electorate".' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21(4): 683–702.
- Zittel, T. 2003. 'Political Representation in the Networked Society: The Americanisation of European Systems of Responsible Party Government?' *Journal of Legislative Studies* 9(3): 32–53.

Copyright of *Australian Journal of Public Administration* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.