

The Impact of the Internet on Parliaments: a Legislative Studies Framework

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a framework to study the impact of the Internet on parliaments from a legislative studies perspective. This area of study has been addressed only by an Internet studies perspective and, as a consequence, we still know little about the impact of the Internet on parliamentary activity. The framework proposed in this article integrates the 'offline' context of each parliament (institutional factors) in the analysis of the impact of the Internet, identifying different functions played by parliament (other than just representation) and shifting the focus to the institution of parliament, rather than MPs individually considered. This is complemented by a brief exploratory analysis of the impact of the Internet in four parliaments (British, European, Portuguese and Swedish) to illustrate some of the points made.

THE Internet has become pervasive in our social activities with a particular impact on the way we communicate and disseminate information. In this context, the impact of the Internet on the political sphere is tremendous not only in the way citizens participate politically, but also in the way institutions operate. Yet, we still know little about the impact the Internet has had on parliament, a key institution in most political systems. This article proposes a legislative studies framework to study the impact of the Internet on parliament. Although this topic has been the object of previous research, this has come from an Internet studies perspective rather than a legislative studies one. As a consequence, most studies have not taken into due account the *multiplicity of ways* through which the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can have an impact on parliament and the way *institutional factors* affect this impact. This article identifies the different dimensions through which the Internet and other ICT may have an impact on parliaments. Although this article does not make an empirical analysis of data, its reflection has been prompted by research on four European parliaments (British, European, Portuguese and Swedish) and some of this material will be used to illustrate our reasoning.¹

Pervasiveness of the Internet among parliaments

Parliaments all around the world have embraced the Internet, in both developed and developing countries, in established and establishing democracies and even in non-democracies. What is more, this has been a very fast process, as can be seen by looking at the indicator of existence of a national parliament website. In 2000, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reported that 57% of all national parliaments had a website.² Six years later the same source says that 171 out of 188 national parliaments (91%) have a website.³ The question is not anymore whether parliaments are using the Internet, but more in what way this is happening and what impact it is having on parliamentary activity.

However, although most national parliaments are now wired, the introduction and implementation of ICT in these institutions is often a difficult process. Due to its characteristics, it is often a major task to introduce any changes in a parliamentary institution. Specifically, the combination of the fact that parliaments are *collective* bodies and with a high degree of *visibility*, added to the fact that they have to be seen as taking *accountable* decisions, means that any introduction of changes often faces many hurdles. Besides outside publics such as citizens and the media, parliaments respond and act for different internal audiences (parties/MPs, administrative body), who often have differing and even opposing agendas. To add to this, parliaments lack of a clearly identifiable collective institutional voice—someone who speaks and acts for parliament.⁴ Again this hinders the process of implementation of ICT when quick (and sometimes controversial) decisions need to be identified and made. The pace of parliamentary change is therefore often inadequate to the pace of ICT change. The implementation of ICT in parliament is not just about introducing a few electronic mechanisms and using email, it is also about changes in procedures and culture. As Longley put it, ‘as an institution such as parliament “grows up” over time, it develops well-articulated internal relationships and structures. It develops, to a degree, an institutional memory which increasingly can mould and influence the behaviour of its members’.⁵ In this instance, new institutions such as the Scottish Parliament may find it simpler to introduce an embedded system of use of ICT, than would for instance the long-standing British Houses of Parliament.

Still, although this development has come late in comparison to many e-government and e-democracy projects, in recent years we have seen an emphasis on maximising ICT in parliament. Namely there has been a strong effort from international organisations to support the development of ICT in parliaments; not only through the IPU but also other organisations such as the European Union, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the World Bank.⁶ While the

need to utilise ICT to enhance parliamentary work has been politically accepted on many instances,⁷ the technical costs associated with this often constitute a hurdle difficult to overcome; hence the importance of international projects such as the ones quoted above. Besides this, a number of important Internet networks have also developed with the purpose of supporting the development of ICT in parliaments and exchanging experiences. Good examples of this are e-parliament (www.e-parl.net/eparliament/welcome.do, accessed on 13 February 2007), a virtual network that brings together Members of Parliament from all over the world, and ICT Parliament (www.ictparliament.org/, accessed on 13 February 2007) more specifically aimed at exchanging experiences in the use of ICT in parliament; but see also more geographically based initiatives such as Africa i-Parliaments (www.parliaments.info/, accessed on 13 February 2007) or the ECPRD.⁸ Finally, the importance of ICT for parliaments is well illustrated in the recent UNDP guide on good practice for parliaments in the twenty-first century.⁹ The guide gives numerous examples of ways through which parliaments all over the world have been making use of the Internet and other ICT to enhance their activity and image. See, in particular, the emphasis put on the potential of ICT in terms of parliaments' openness and accessibility.

Potential and challenges brought in by the Internet

The potential offered to parliaments by the Internet and other ICT is colossal in terms of enhancing this institution's work and image. However, it also brings many challenges, which, if not addressed adequately, could in fact undermine the parliamentary institution.

The potential is essentially threefold:

- *communication* possibilities (both bilateral and multilateral),
- *dissemination* of information and
- *management* of information.

All of these can have an impact on all of the functions played by parliament,¹⁰ namely of education, but in particular its three main ones: legislative, representative and scrutiny, as also identified by Olesen *et al.*¹¹ The Internet opens up possibilities in terms of communicating with citizens, but also with pressure groups, between parliamentarians, and with governmental bodies. It can provide the means for more efficient and thorough work in committees or for a speedier consideration of bills. It can make scrutiny more detailed and more up-to-date. It can support MPs in one of their typical complaints: the lack of information available for them to effectively scrutinise government. This is part of the potential.

However, the Internet also brings many new challenges. Email overload is a specific problem that many MPs now face, as shown in

previous studies¹² and confirmed by the MPs we interviewed with the exception of the Portuguese MPs. Email overload seems to be a particular problem where there is a strong link between MP and constituency and/or a general high level of ICT usage. Another crucial challenge is the ability to deal with the very high levels of information made available today to MPs, at the same time as the decision making processes have speeded up. As many MPs pointed out to us, their main challenge is to know how to select information.

But, more importantly, the potential of the Internet can face many challenges in the way it is implemented depending on the institutional characteristics of each parliament. Email overload may be a problem, for instance, but it can be addressed if adequate resources and support staff are available; however, often these *simply* do not exist. What is more, different ways of implementing ICT will work in different ways according to each parliamentary institution and its characteristics. As Olesen *et al.*¹³ note: 'The starting point for supporting the use of ICTs in parliaments is not the deployment of the latest technology, but rather a comprehensive understanding of the way in which parliaments operate (...)'. Or, as one of our interviewees put it, '(...) *IT facilities are only a consequence of organisations and not their cause*'.¹⁴ It is therefore crucial to understand the different ways through which the Internet and other ICT are impacting on parliaments, according to, for example, whether an institution is older or newer, with higher or lower resources, elected through a majoritarian electoral system or through a proportional one, and so on.

An area overlooked by the legislative studies discipline

Although we know little about how the Internet has impacted parliaments, a number of publications from the Internet studies discipline do address related issues. Electing parliament as a key representative institution, studies from that subject area have developed naturally as the wider discussion on the impact of the Internet on democracy enlarged. See, for instance, the special edition by Coleman *et al.*¹⁵ in 1999, which sets out the study of the Internet in parliament in the context of a wider debate on the contribution of the Internet for a successful democracy, which would be dependent 'upon efficient and multi-directional flows of information' between citizens and representative institutions. This debate is a wider one that looks into the extent to which the Internet has introduced an extra layer of participation into politics. Between those who believe that the Internet could allow for a wider and more in-depth participation into politics and those who see the Internet as a mere deepening of an existing divide between citizens already politically active and those who are not.¹⁶

Parliament has been elected as a focus for research by the Internet studies because it fits into the 'representation chain' that links citizens to politics. So, rather than studying the impact of the Internet on

parliament as such, most studies have instead focused on the *function of representation* (how is the Internet affecting the representative function played by parliament?) and more specifically on the MPs, rather than the institution in itself. In the special edition on the use of the Internet by MPs, Hoff *et al.*¹⁷ give a slightly different (but related) justification of their choice of MPs as focus of study in that they are seen as an elite group of particular interest, because ‘they have power to convert their attitudes into laws (...) which may have great impact on society’. So although many of these studies have indeed looked into the effects of new means of communication into parliament, this has happened more because parliament *fits their wider purpose* of understanding the impact of the Internet on political activity and participation, rather than stimulated by an objective to better understand the institution of parliament. These studies have effectively derived from an *outsider* view, rather than an *insider*.

This literature on parliament and the Internet should therefore be understood in a wider context of studies on political representation and the web. Literature that has been complemented by a much wider set of studies focused on parties.¹⁸ However, contrary to the studies on parliament, the literature on parties and the Internet has developed more from an *insider* point of view in that key authors, such as Rachel Gibson, were already experts on the study of parties before centring on the effects of the Internet. The legislative studies scholar community instead has hardly looked at this new area of the impact of ICT.¹⁹

As a consequence of the type of studies developed, the study of the relationship between Internet and parliament has focused mainly on the following:

- The MP as unit of analysis
- The function of representation
- MPs’ usage of ICT
- MPs’ perceptions towards ICT

Besides this, the geographical focus of these studies has also been limited, with the most complex studies coming from Anglo-Saxon examples such as the British parliament.²⁰ In general, Internet studies are still largely dominated by the US scholar community²¹ and this has an impact on the type of studies developed on parliament. The *drive* by studies on Anglo-Saxon cases, or by Anglo-Saxon authors, may partly explain the concentration on MPs, rather than Parliamentary Groups (PGs), for instance, despite the fact that the latter are the core unit of organisation of many parliaments. The European Union has also acted more recently as a key drive in these studies. See in particular the European Parliaments Research Initiative (EPRI) which has acted as a catalyst for a network of parliamentarians from the national parliaments within the European Union, in particular

MPs considered to be 'early adopters'; that is, MPs who are particular advocates of the use of ICT in their own parliaments. Besides regular conferences, EPRI has also developed studies on the use of ICT by European parliamentarians.²²

Still, there is indeed an emerging healthy variety of studies in this area as summarised in one of EPRI's reports.²³ We know therefore that although the use of interactive platforms of communication with citizens is still of limited use, parliamentarians in Europe are using ICT more and more and on a regular basis, even those who resisted this move at the beginning. This was confirmed by the interviews we carried out, where even MPs who saw themselves as non-computer literate confirmed that the use of email and Internet searching is part of their regular work.²⁴ However, as noted above, the scope of these studies has been limited in terms of the impact on parliament as an institution. We need studies more comprehensive to *what parliaments do* and that take into due account the *offline characteristics* of parliamentary institutions.

Two notable exceptions for this are the studies by Norris and by Trechsel *et al.*, which have a focus on the institution of parliament.²⁵ Both studies looked specifically at the contents of the websites of parliaments,²⁶ in particular the level of communication interactivity and information available on each one. These studies took into account some offline context. In the case of Norris, the level of democratisation of the country was taken into account, as well as its technological development. Trechsel *et al.* added to these some Institutional variables such as parliamentary versus presidential systems, federalist versus unitary systems and unicameral versus bicameral systems. Although all of these are important to explain differences between parliaments, the offline context needs to be *more granular to what actually differentiates parliaments*; namely institutional factors internal to parliamentary organisation and activity, or that have a direct impact on this.

In order to have studies about the relationship between the Internet and parliament that are more about what parliaments do, we need studies that (1) focus on the institution of parliament and (2) on the multiplicity of functions played by parliaments. On the other hand, in order to take into due account the offline contexts, this analysis needs to consider (3) institutional factors specific to parliamentary organisation and activity. The foundations for this framework are what we propose to develop in the next section.

The relationship between the Internet and parliament from a legislative studies perspective

Parliaments play a variety of functions, besides representation or the traditional view that parliaments exist to legislate. The vast majority of parliaments have in fact little role in legislating, with this being

typically a governmental responsibility.²⁷ Parliaments' functions range from representative and legislative to scrutiny, education, legitimation of the political system, conflict resolution, 'safety-valve', recruitment and so on. The Internet and other ICT have the potential to have a huge impact on these functions, providing new means to enhance the work and image of parliaments. They may even be a way of overcoming some institutional constraints—for instance, ICT could bring in elements of Transformative type of working into Arena type of parliaments (such as consensual type of discussion or emphasis on Committee work),²⁸ or introduce a new layer of representation at the MP level in systems dominated by PGs, or still provide the means for policy-influencing in parliaments typically acting as legislatures with little-or-no policy impact.²⁹

The impact of ICT on this variety of functions is addressed to some extent by Coleman and Nathanson in their latest review of European parliamentarians' practices,³⁰ when they differentiate three main roles played by MPs: representatives, legislators and party actors. Their review is focused on the MP, rather than the institution, looks at 'early adopters' MPs and it overlooks other roles, such as scrutiny which has now become one of the main functions of parliament. Their study does represent a more complex approach to the topic than previously done though, as it provides a breakdown of the ways ICT are impacting on different functions, in particular in terms of the legislative role—pointing out benefits such as the access to more information, but also the risks in terms of difficulty to manage this information and poor quality drafting.

In its recent report about how to empower parliaments through ICT,³¹ the UNDP identifies three main functions played by parliaments (legislation, representation and oversight), assessing the potential impact of ICT on each one and drawing recommendations on this. The report singles out the representative function as the one on which 'ICT can perhaps have their largest impact',³² because of the new tools of interaction it offers between MPs and citizens. However, there is no reason why ICT should not have an equally large impact on the functions of legislation or scrutiny, for instance. The question is we do not know enough about the extent to which this impact is happening.

One consideration worth taking into account is that the impact on the function of representation has probably been felt *more quickly* than on other functions, and importantly *regardless of parliament*, because it has come from outside pressure, from the pervasiveness of the Internet in society. The pressure on the function of representation has arisen essentially because citizens started using the Internet more, rather than anything internal to parliament; in most instances parliaments and MPs have merely adapted to an outside pressure. This is not to say though that the Internet and other ICT may not have an equal impact on other functions besides representation; it may simply be a

different type of impact, in particular with a different timing. The current difficulties felt by some parliaments in dealing with citizens' e-participation may suggest that the pressure on the function of representation can be such that, in actual fact, it is much more difficult to make the most of the potential of the Internet in terms of representation; simply because of the difficulty for parliament and MPs to manage it.

Table 1 provides an overview of different functions played by parliament on which the Internet and other ICT can have a direct impact.

Table 1. Functions played by parliament

Conflict -resolution	Solving conflicts in the political system; between political actors, between institutions, between institutions and citizens
Education	Providing information about the political system, as well as its activity; providing access to parliament
Legislation	Collating needs for legislation; originating, drafting and amending bills, influencing governmental legislation
Legitimation	Reassurance that the political system is working; institutions are playing their role; citizens' needs are being attended to
Representation	Receiving pleas from citizens, expressing the will of citizens, acting for citizens
Scrutiny	Routine scrutiny of governmental actions and policies; ensuring accountability between key institutions in political system. Scrutiny of other relevant bodies, such as the European Union

Note: List of functions adapted from both Bagehot¹⁰, p. 37–9 and Norton¹⁰, p. 6; and identified as being particularly subject to an impact from the use of the Internet.

By focusing on each of the above functions—or at least by *differentiating* them and *identifying* which function is being dealt with—we may start to better understand the way the Internet is impacting on parliaments.

Across the functions played by parliament we need to consider the three ICT processes identified in the previous section: communication, dissemination of information and management of information. These processes affect each of parliament's functions in varying degrees. The process of management of information, for instance, is of particular importance for the legislative and scrutiny functions, and of less relevance for the representative function. On the other hand, the communication process is of particular importance for the representative function. Similarly, the process of dissemination of information is key for the education function.

More specifically, these processes can integrate the ICT tools illustrated in Table 2:

The three processes can naturally overlap and involve a variety of actors. These include not only MPs and citizens, but also parties,

Table 2. Parliamentary tools used for each ICT process

Communication	Email; Website; Web-based forms; message boards; online forums/e-consultations; (wireless) network used in parliament; parliamentary network for access outside parliament
Dissemination of information	Website; email; internal information systems such as intranets
Management of information	Data bases with information about parliamentary activity; parliamentary archives; digital libraries; (wireless) network used in parliament; parliamentary network for access outside parliament; intranets

Note: Please note that these are mere examples of tools. The author is no expert on technology and is well aware that many more examples could be included in this table.

parliamentary groups, government members, civil servants, parliamentary staff, pressure groups and other relevant bodies (such as local and regional government, supra-national institutions, etc.). The impact of the Internet goes, therefore, far beyond the relationship between MPs and citizens. It can also affect the relationship, for example, between MPs themselves, leading to more communication between MPs, or to a more consensual style of discussion, or instead, as some of our interviewees pointed out, to a quick escalation of problems. Or, still for

Table 3. Institutional factors

Democracy context	How democratically established the political system is
Constitutional powers	What constitutional powers parliament has, namely in terms of legislative and scrutiny powers
Institutional structure	How many chambers the parliament has. If bicameral: relationship between the two chambers, characteristics of second chamber (powers and membership)
Electoral system	What type of electoral system is in place, namely in terms of the continuum between pure majoritarian systems and proportional representation ones
Relationship PG/MPs	How much independence MPs have in relation to their Parliamentary Group (PG)
Parliament's age	How old the parliamentary institution is
Parliamentary work structure	How parliament is organised in terms of Committees and Chamber (roles and powers ascribed to each); number of committees, their composition and resources
Parliamentary administrative organisation	What administrative structure parliament has. In particular, which department(s) has responsibilities for ICT. How this department(s) relates with other parliamentary units, such as MPs, parties, committees, but also standard parliamentary departments
Resources	What resources are available, not only infrastructures, but also support staff; and how these are allocated (important distinction: PG or MP)

example, to a better management of information between government departments and parliament.

Finally, in order to assess the impact of the Internet and other ICT on parliament's functions, we need to take into account the *offline* context; that is institutional factors specific to parliament. Table 3 summarises the main institutional factors that need to be taken into account.

The institutional factors provide the *context* to understand to what extent the ICT processes are affecting parliament's functions. We could naturally list many more factors, but these are *specific* to parliament and have a direct impact on its relationship with the Internet. The 'Constitutional powers', for instance, are an essential first step to understand the type of parliament is being dealt with; namely, whether it is a parliament mainly focused on scrutiny or legislation. The 'Democracy context' may be seen as a more general factor,³³ but it does have a direct impact on the way ICT is implemented as it influences the political culture of the parliament, not only in terms of MPs but also parliamentary staff. Parliamentary staff are a key component of any parliament and yet we often neglect to include them in our analysis. In the case of the Internet, it becomes even more crucial to integrate parliamentary staff in our analysis, as our interviews showed time and time again.

The importance of parliamentary staff in the implementation of ICT is two-fold. First, although politicians may have the final say on policy-making, most of the day-to-day decisions on the management of parliament is taken by parliamentary staff. And this applies particularly to the case of ICT, a 'new' area, of rapid development (difficult to follow through the commonly slow political process) and where the 'technical expert' status contributes to make it a *realm separate* from the 'political'. Secondly, because the demands brought in through these new media, in terms of dealing with high volumes of e-queries and circulation of information, require extra support given to politicians. So, ICT can make parliamentary staff all the more crucial in the process of sifting, selecting and interpreting information. As one of our interviewed support staff confirmed, they are a key '*gate-keeper*'.³⁴

In this context, it is therefore crucial to consider what 'Resources' (another of our institutional factors) are available. Resources such as the equipment and tools made available specifically to MPs, but also wider tools available in the institution of parliament. Besides this, the number of support staff allocated to MPs or PGs is also crucial. For instance, one can hardly expect an MP who has to share secretarial support with several other MPs (and who has no research support) to have well developed personal websites. Comparisons between parliaments on ICT performance can be very misleading if the availability of resources of each parliament is not taken into account. Besides the 'volume' of resources available, we also need to consider how these are allocated³⁵; that is, are budgets ascribed to PGs or MPs? Are resources shared between PGs and MPs, is it up to the PGs to distribute these, or

are they allocated directly to MPs? If resources always matter, they matter even more when it comes to assessing the impact of ICT.

'Institutional structure' needs to be taken into account, as it can have a structural impact on parliamentary activity if a second chamber exists, particularly if it has important powers. The co-ordination between chambers is not always a straightforward process in terms of implementing ICT and this can have consequences not only in the communication between chambers, but also in terms of management of information and the image projected to citizens of either Chamber through their websites.

The 'Electoral system', on the other hand, has a direct impact on many of parliaments' key features, such as number and size of parties present in parliament, relationship with citizens, relationship between parties and MPs. We distinguish this factor from the one of 'Relationship PG/MPs' because it has a wider impact on the functioning of parliament. One direct impact is, for instance, the extent to which a parliament is constituency based, or not. The current literature on parliament and the Internet tends to assume an established focus on the constituency link, when in reality this unit of representation is meaningless for many parliaments.

We then specify the 'relationship between PG and MP' as a key factor, as this has a very strong impact on the working of any MP. It affects not only the independence of behaviour of MPs, but more importantly the scope of action of MPs individually taken. If the core organisational unit of a parliament is the PG and not the MP, it means not only that resources are not allocated individually to MPs, but also that they channel all of their action through the PGs (in some cases the parties themselves). Coming back to the example of the personal website, for many MPs it makes more sense to have their 'personal' website on the PG (or party) websites, rather than a separate one. Where MPs have the independence and means to develop their own websites and communication tools, then one can expect the spread of websites individual to each parliamentarian.

'Parliamentary work structure' is another institutional factor that can have a crucial impact in the way ICT affects parliamentary activity. We refer here to the division by Chamber and committees, their responsibilities and powers. As recognised by Beetham³⁶, 'much of the work of parliament is now carried on in committees'. However, although many parliaments have developed complex and well-resourced committee systems, others have not. There are huge differences between parliaments in the way their committee system is organised.³⁷ Considering the benefits that ICT can bring for committee work (in all three processes of communication, dissemination and management of information) and the impact it has on parliaments' legislative and scrutiny functions, it is important to mediate any assessments of parliamentary activity through a consideration of the type of committee system in place (number of committees, composition, powers, resources available).³⁸ Committees are smaller and

generally more flexible units of organisation where ICT implementation may be eased; but this depends on the committees system of each parliament.

'Parliamentary administrative organisation' is particularly important for the implementation of ICT in parliament. The access to ICT tools is usually co-ordinated and managed by a specific service and depending on the way these specialised services have developed, they will interact with PGs/MPs and other parliamentary services in different ways. In some parliaments, there is a clear top-down structure that deals with the implementation of ICT and crosses all areas of parliamentary activity. In other parliaments, ICT responsibilities are fragmented across separate services and there is no clear coherent line of action.³⁹ A more or less fragmented administrative organisation has different consequences in the process of implementation of ICT. This can lead to a more or less *integrated* use of ICT in parliamentary activity, as well as a slower or quicker ability of the political actors to adapt to new technology. It also has an impact in the ability to give adequate technical support and training.

Finally, 'Parliament's age' can help to understand its ability to deal with the implementation of ICT. It is important to distinguish between the age of parliament and the age of the political system, as these may not coincide at all. For instance, the Flemish or the Scottish parliaments are very recent institutions that exist in well-established democracies. Depending on the resources available, implementing ICT in a new parliament can be a smoother process, as one is able to address from scratch not only infrastructures problems, but also the parliamentary processes themselves.

Associated with these institutional factors, the offline context also includes other dynamic factors that often provide the explanation for the way ICT has been implemented in parliament. One clear example is the existence, or not, of a political leadership pushing for the implementation of ICT.⁴⁰ In an institution such as parliament traditionally resistant to changes (particularly external changes such as with ICT), political leadership can play a crucial difference. As indicated above, the implementation of ICT in parliament has consequences to its overall structure and activity. Political leadership can be the key factor in making sure that ICT implementation is comprehensive to all parliamentary structure and activity.

The institutional factors do not need to be taken all into account every time the use of the Internet by parliament is being assessed. However, the institutional context does need to be integrated into the analysis of the relationship between parliaments and the Internet, as it gives the clues that may explain why specific tools (such as MPs' personal websites) are being used in different ways. Only then, can we make an evaluation of the extent to which the Internet is being used and other key questions such as the extent to which the Internet is

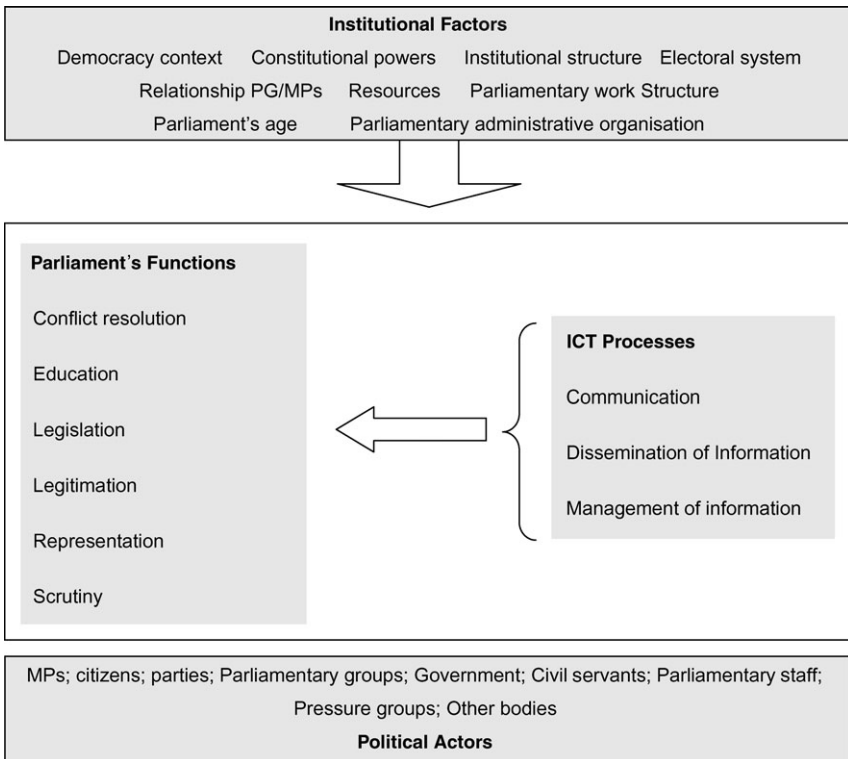
adding value to parliamentary work and image. The institutional factors are often the independent variable that could explain some of the differences found in the use of ICT.

A legislative studies framework to assess the impact of the Internet and other ICT on parliament

Figure 1 systematises a legislative studies framework to guide the analysis of the impact of the Internet and other ICT on parliament. It puts the focus on the institution of parliament, spells out a few of its key functions besides the one of representation, shows the main ICT processes that have an impact on these functions and shows the institutional factors that may act as a constraint on the way those ICT processes impact on parliament’s functions. It also reminds us that the political actors involved in this process are many, going beyond the relationship between MP and citizen.

The focus on the institution of parliament, rather than the MP, does not mean we should not pay special attention to how individual MPs are using the ICT—after all, many of the ICT strategies used today in

Figure 1. The Impact of the Internet and Other ICT on Parliament



parliaments have been introduced by enthusiastic MPs and their development has often derived from the individual needs of MPs, and they are a key component of any parliament. However, the unit of analysis of the MP should be seen as one among other such as PGs or Committees, and more importantly should be integrated into a larger context, their parliament and, when relevant, their PG.

Similarly, pointing out other functions beyond representation does not mean we should not pay special attention to this one; it merely intends to show that parliaments do far more beyond the function of representation; in particular, it is important to study the impact on the legislative and scrutiny functions further. One would not expect studies to look at every single function played by parliament—each study should have its own focus. However, it would be interesting to see the development of an array of studies that touch on a variety of parliamentary functions, besides the representation one.

The consideration of the offline context, through some of the institutional factors we pointed out, is particularly important for comparative studies. Some of the comparative studies developed previously centre on online usage and/or perceptions, neglecting differences between parliamentary contexts that often provide the explanation for some of the differences identified. In particular, the empirical research at the basis of this reflection (on the British parliament, the European, the Portuguese and the Swedish)⁴¹ has showed the key importance of Resources and the Relationship between PG/MP, two independent variables that have been particularly disregarded in the literature published on this topic. This is why we finish this article by illustrating our reasoning through a brief exploratory analysis of the way these two institutional factors constrain the use of the Internet and other ICT in parliament, based on these four case studies.

Exploratory analysis of case studies

In their study of the websites of European parliaments, Trechsel *et al.*⁴² gave an indication of how factors such as resources or organisation can be important in the way the Internet is being used, when at one stage they say: 'It seems to us more likely that the differences are due to varying organisational structures, strategies and resources of the respective parliamentary administrations'. Despite only touching very briefly on this issue, the recognition is there that resources and parliamentary organisation matter, in particular, we would emphasise, when it comes to the use of Internet and other ICT.

The interviews that we carried out showed very clear differences in the availability of resources and the way this has had an impact on the use of the Internet. Our case studies divide into two separate groups: the Portuguese and Swedish parliaments on one hand and the British and European on the other. Whereas the Portuguese and Swedish MPs have to share support staff (both secretarial and research staff) among

several, the British and European have typically a small team of staff working for each MP. The ratio between MP and staff in the Portuguese parliament varies between PG, but typically the support given by one secretary is shared between seven MPs, with research assistants being allocated by committee; that is, PGs allocate a member of staff to give research support to their Members in each committee; typically, each of this staff will support two or more committees. The Swedish MPs describe a very similar situation, although with a better ratio of support which stays at five MPs per support staff regardless of the PG. In both parliaments, budgets are mainly allocated per PG, although the Swedish does also include a budgetary provision individual to each MP. This provision of resources is very different from the British and European parliaments, where these are allocated essentially per each MP. This has an impact not only on the volume of support given to MPs individually, but also in terms of the equipment allocated to each.

One of the key consequences of the type of support staff available is the extent to which MPs are able to use the Internet to its full extent. Most MPs interviewed pointed out the difficulties in dealing with the extension of information made available through the Internet, but to some this brings bigger constraints than to other. The Swedish MPs, in particular, shared of their frustration for not being able to make full use of the potential of the Internet.

Another interesting finding that needs to be further investigated was the extent to which the availability of support staff actually keeps the MP away from the full potential of ICT. We take an MP from the British parliament and one from the Portuguese parliament for comparison;⁴³ both declared themselves as computer-phobic, showing clear unfamiliarity with the Internet. But whereas the Portuguese MP is actually making use of the Internet for parliamentary work forcing himself to learn how to make the most of this tool, the British one has not made any move in that sense, because his staff act for him; not only has this MP a personal website, but also his email is used regularly for contact with citizens. However, all of this is managed by his staff, not the MP himself. The Portuguese MP, on the other hand, expressly told us that he had never developed adequate ICT skills up to becoming an MP, because up to then he always had had staff who dealt with this, in particular while he was Mayor of a council.⁴⁴

This distribution of resources can have an impact on the ability to develop personal websites. The Portuguese MPs tend not to have personal websites, contrary to the British and European ones (even if they personally do not have an input into it). The Swedish MPs, on the other hand, seem to have a high percentage of personal websites, which is particularly interesting when we take into account the level of support they have.⁴⁵ A finding that needs further investigation, but which may be related to the fact mentioned by several of our interviewees that their parties are putting pressure on them to develop personal

websites. The Portuguese not only did not have personal websites, but also in most cases did not see the need to have one. Most of these MPs referred to their PG or party, where they have an online space.

The division by PG can also have an impact in the way ICT tools within parliament are organised. In the Swedish case, for instance, MPs prefer to use communication systems based in their PG, rather than parliament's own system.⁴⁶ As the interviewee from the technical support team said to us, this leads to problems of integration within the whole parliament. This interviewee pointed out that one of the key areas that needs improvement is a better integration of the parties into parliament's intranet. A similar problem occurs in the Portuguese parliament. Although the intranet is widely used by MPs, tools are still compartmented per PG such as email systems. Instead of an overall email system for the whole of parliament, there is one for each PG.⁴⁷ As our interviewees pointed out, this brings problems not only in terms of waste of resources, but also of communication.

These are a few examples of ways through which parliament's institutional factors have a direct impact on the way the Internet is being used, in particular, in terms of resources availability and the relationship between MP and PG. We now consider a separate issue: to what extent is the Internet and other ICT bringing changes to parliamentary practice and to what extent is it adding value?

An interesting finding is the fact that the Internet may be bringing an extra layer of contact between MPs and citizens in the Portuguese parliament.⁴⁸ The Portuguese parliament is elected by a pure proportional representation electoral system and is characterised by a very strong focus on the PG to the detriment of MPs. This hinders the direct contact between MPs and citizens and the whole system has been developed so that the key representational unit is the party.⁴⁹ However, the interviews showed that the use of email has led to a considerable increase in the direct contact between MP and citizen. In this sense, the use of the Internet is bringing in changes in parliamentary practice. The same phenomenon was shown by some MEPs, in particular from the new member countries. This is an important finding for legislative studies scholars showing that they need to look beyond the traditional indicators of relationship between parliament and citizens, a clear indicator that the analysis of the impact of the Internet on parliament matters.

On the other hand, our interviews indicated that committee work is one area that still needs considerable development for the maximisation of the benefits of ICT. The interviews showed that committee work is still heavily based on traditional procedures, in terms of circulation of information, summoning of meetings, communication and so on. In the Swedish parliament, in particular, committees have developed very different procedures as a consequence of different personal styles of use of the Internet, resulting in a lack of integration. The need to integrate

this was pointed out by the Director for the Department of Information and Knowledge Transmission as one of the main challenges that the Swedish parliament faces in ICT.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The study of the impact of the Internet on parliament is still in its infancy and we need therefore many more studies in this area. Up to now this study has remained mainly focused on the MP, rather than the institution of parliament and on the function of representation. What is more, up to now the legislative studies community has hardly looked at this issue. Considerable work needs to be done on the wider impact of the Internet and other ICT on parliament, namely in terms of its other functions such as legislative and scrutiny. Importantly also, the offline context of each parliamentary institution needs to be taken into account. Partly because this type of study has developed outside the legislative studies discipline, the parliamentary offline context has not been taken into due account. The main aim of this article was to propose a legislative studies framework that integrates this offline context in the study of the relationship between parliament and the Internet, as well as showing the variety of functions that this may affect.

Having established this context of analysis, we can then pursue to an adequate study of this topic and address crucial questions such as have the new means of technology brought any changes to parliamentary practice? Has it had an impact on parliament's image? Or, importantly, to what extent is the Internet bringing in an extra dimension of explanation that allows parliaments to overcome their own institutional constraints? Is the example mentioned above of a higher contact between MP and citizens, in a context that traditionally hinders this, a mere example, or could the Internet indeed provide the means to overcome some of these constraints? Or is the Internet instead just reproducing the institutional factors, as shown in the way resources are compartmented by PG? In short, is the Internet bringing value to parliamentary work? In what areas of parliamentary work? Here is a very wide area waiting for further exploration from the legislative studies discipline.

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- 1 A comprehensive analysis of this data is made in X. Dai and P. Norton eds., *The Internet and Parliamentary Democracy in Europe - special issue, The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13, (3), (2007), (forthcoming). The research included interviews with MPs and parliamentary support staff, which will be used to illustrate some of the points made in this article. The number of valid interviews were as follows: British Parliament, three interviews and one workshop; European Parliament, 16 interviews and 1 workshop; Portuguese Parliament, 9 interviews; Swedish Parliament, 9 interviews. The interviews were done between May and September 2005, with the exception of one for the Swedish case carried out in March 2006.
 - 2 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites*, <http://www.ipu.org/cntr-e/web.pdf>, 2000, p.3, accessed 13 February 2007.
 - 3 According to information provided by the IPU to the author in June 2006; note that this includes only National parliaments and not sub-national or regional ones. According to the UNDP, 97% of the parliaments in developed countries have a website and 81% in developing ones (UNDP, *Empowering Parliaments Through the Use of ICTs*, United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.sdnhq.undp.org/~raul/e-parl/study/final/e-parl-report-final-printer.pdf>, 2006, 13 February 2007, p.19).
 - 4 With thanks to one of the referees for identifying this point so clearly.
 - 5 L. Longley, 'Parliaments as Changing Institutions and as Agents of Regime Change: Evolving Perspectives and a New Research Framework', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 2, (2), 1996, 22. Longley adapts from S. Patterson and G. Copeland, 'Parliaments in the Twenty-first Century', in Copeland and Patterson (eds), *Parliaments in the Modern World*, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 6.
 - 6 See, for example, the IPU Technical Cooperation Programme which 'assists national parliaments (...) to improve the organization of their work and strengthen their infrastructure' (IPU, www.ipu.org/dem-e/assistance.htm), or the recent guidelines issued by the IPU as good practice (D. Beetham, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: a Guide to Good Practice*, IPU, www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/democracy_en.pdf, 2006); or still the European Union funded projects of European Parliaments Research Initiative (EPRI, www.epri.org/epriori/EPRIorg_Home.php) and A. Trechsel, et al., *Evaluation of The Use of New technologies in Order to facilitate Democracy in Europe*, European Parliament, STOA 116 EN 10-2003, 2003, <http://edc.unige.ch/edcadmin/images/STOA.pdf>, the UNDP ICT4D Projects (www.apdip.net/projects/undp/), the USAID support programmes such as the one reported in USAID, *Kenya Legislative Strengthening Project Final Technical Report*, 2005, http://pdf.dec.org/pdf_docs/Pdacf840.pdf, or World Bank initiatives such as the following two studies: T. Kingham, *E-Parliaments—The use of information and communication technologies to improve parliamentary processes*, World Bank Institute, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/wbi37210Kingham.pdf>, 2003, and T. Mendel, *Parliament and Access to information: Working for Transparent Governance*, World Bank Institute and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2005, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/Parliament_and_Access_to_Information_with_cover.pdf. All accessed on 13 February 2007.
 - 7 See, for example, the Resolution from the 109th IPU Assembly in 2003 (www.ipu.org/conf-e/109-3.htm, accessed on 13 February 2007) or the speech by the President of the IPU, Mr Pier Ferdinand Casini, to the plenary session of the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, November 2005 (www.ipu.org/splz-e/wsis05/speech.pdf, accessed on 13 February 2007).
 - 8 European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation—a network of parliamentary officials mainly from European parliaments. Though originally set up for more general information exchange purposes, recently it has focused particularly on the use of ICT (www.ecprd.org, accessed on 13 February 2007).
 - 9 D. Beetham, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: a Guide to Good Practice*.
 - 10 For a detailed breakdown of functions played by parliament see P. Norton, 'Parliaments: a framework for analysis', in P. Norton (ed.), *Parliaments in Western Europe*, Frank Cass, 1990. See also Bagehot's earlier identification of parliament's functions (W. Bagehot, 'The House of Commons', in P. Norton (ed.), *Legislatures*, Oxford University Press, 1992, ori. ed. 1867). Bagehot identifies the following functions: elective, expressive, teaching, informing and legislative.
 - 11 H. Olesen et al., *Empowering Parliaments Through the Use of ICTs*, UNDP, <http://sdnhq.undp.org/~raul/e-parl/study/final/e-parl-report-final-printer.pdf>, 2006, accessed on 13 February 2007.
 - 12 See on this matter the reports produced by Congress Online for the Congress of the United States of America on the extension of the problem of email overload and the initiatives used to address this: K. Goldschmidt, *E-mail Overload in Congress*, Congress Online Project—Online Issue Briefs, www.congressonlineproject.org/emailoverload.pdf, 2001, accessed on 07 June 2006 and Congress Online Project, 'Congress Online: Special Report Email Overload in Congress—Update'

- www.congressonlineproject.org/pf080702.html, 2002, accessed on 07 June 2006. For email overload problems in Europe see S. Coleman and B. Nathanson, *Learning to Live with the Internet—How European Parliamentarians Are Adapting to the Digital Age*, EPRI, www.epri.org/epriknowledge/contents/Studies.php, 2005, accessed on 13 February 2007.
- 13 H. Olesen *et al.*, *Empowering Parliaments Through the Use of ICTs*, p. 6.
 - 14 Parliamentary support staff, European Parliament, interviewed on the 30 June 2005.
 - 15 S. Coleman, *et al.*, 'Parliament in the Age of the Internet', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 52,(3), 1999, p. 365.
 - 16 P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, 2001; R. Gibson, *et al.*, 'Online Participation in the UK: Testing a "Contextualised" Model of Internet Effects' *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 7,(4), 2005, pp. 561–83.
 - 17 J. Hoff, 'The Democratic Potentials of Information technology: Attitudes of European MPs Towards New Technologies', *Information Polity*, 9, (1/2), 2004, p. 57.
 - 18 See a summary of this literature in S. Ward, *et al.*, 'Parties and the Internet: an Overview', in R. Gibson, P. Nixon and S. Ward (eds), *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* Routledge, 2003.
 - 19 Other than from practitioners themselves. See, for instance, the personal account in R. Allan, 'Parliament, Elected Representatives and Technology 1997–2005—Good in Parts?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59, (2), 2006, pp. 360–5, and the very detailed analysis of the US Congress and European parliaments' legislative information systems in J. Griffith, *Beyond Transparency: New Standards for Legislative Information Systems*, ECPRD, 2006, <http://www.ecprd.org/Public/publicat.asp> (accessed on 13 February 2007).
 - 20 See a prime example in S. Ward and W. Lusoli, "From Weird to Wired": MPs, the Internet and Representative Politics in the UK', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11,(1), 2005, 57–81.
 - 21 R. Gibson, W. Lusoli, *et al.*, 'Online Participation in the UK: Testing a 'Contextualised' Model of Internet Effects', p. 567.
 - 22 See S. Coleman and B. Nathanson, *Learning to Live with the Internet—How European parliamentarians are adapting to the digital age*; EPRI Knowledge Project, *Parliamentarians and ICTs: Awareness, Understanding and Activity levels of European Parliamentarians*, www.epri.org/epriknowledge/contents/7thconference_mat/200503_07_D101_EPRI_First_Study_final_resent.pdf, 2005; EPRI, 'Reconnecting Parliaments and Citizens' from http://www.epri.org/epriknowledge/contents/Second_EPRI_knowledge_Workshop.php, 2006; all accessed on 13 February 2007.
 - 23 EPRI Knowledge Project, *Parliamentarians and ICTs: Awareness, Understanding and Activity levels of European Parliamentarians*, pp. 9–17.
 - 24 Of particular notice that one Portuguese MP who showed a marked suspicion towards ICT in general, but who confirmed using the Internet regularly for parliamentary work (interviewed on 21 June 2005).
 - 25 P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*, pp. 132–47; A. Trechsel, *et al.*, *op. cit* n6 pp. 5–15. To add to these S. Coleman, 'Parliamentary communication in an age of digital interactivity', *ASLIB proceedings*, 58, (5), 2006, pp. 375–80, includes a brief analysis of web sites of European parliaments.
 - 26 In the case of Norris, the websites analysed were from all parliaments recorded in the IPU with a live website by May 2000; and in the case of Trechsel *et al.* the study was on the national parliaments of the country members and candidates, of the European Union, and of the European Parliament.
 - 27 P. Norton, 'General introduction' in P. Norton (ed.), *Legislatures*, Oxford University Press, 1990.
 - 28 See concepts of Arena and Transformative legislatures in N. Polsby, 'Legislatures', in F. Greenstein and N. Polsby (eds), *Handbook of Political Science*, Addison-Wesley, 1975.
 - 29 See concepts of policy-making, policy-influencing and little-or-no-policy-impact legislatures in P. Norton, 'Parliaments: a framework for analysis', in P. Norton (ed.), *Parliaments in Western Europe*, Frank Cass, 1990.
 - 30 S. Coleman and B. Nathanson, *Learning to Live with the Internet—How European parliamentarians are adapting to the digital age*.
 - 31 H. Olesen *et al.*, *Empowering Parliaments Through the Use of ICTs*.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 - 33 As mentioned above, this factor was taken into account by both Norris and Trechsel *et al.* as, respectively, 'Democratization' and 'Level of democratisation' (P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*; A. Trechsel, *et al.*, *Evaluation of The Use of New technologies in Order to facilitate Democracy in Europe*).
 - 34 British case, interview on the 15 July 2005. This was confirmed by the other interviews on the British case, by both MPs and staff, as well as from the European Parliament.

- 35 The issue of budgets and resources is briefly identified by Zittel in his comparison of the American, German and Swedish cases, as a probable constraint in the way ICT is being used by MPs (T. Zittel, 'Political Representation in the Networked Society: The Americanisation of European Systems of Responsible Party Government?', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9, (3), 2003, 50).
- 36 D. Beetham, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: a Guide to Good Practice*, Chap. 3, p. 2.
- 37 See L. Longley and R. Davidson, *The New Roles of Parliamentary Committees - special issue, The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 4 (1), 1998.
- 38 See, in this context, an interesting consideration—even if brief—of the presence on the web of parliamentary committees in the American, German and Swedish cases in T. Zittel, 'Electronic Democracy and Electronic Parliaments—a comparison between the US House, the Swedish Riksdagen and the German Bundestag'. *Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR)*. 2000, ECPR.
- 39 See comments about this for the British parliament in Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, Hansard Society, 2005, p. 30.
- 40 With thanks to one of the referees for emphasising the importance of making this point explicit.
- 41 As said above, the full empirical analysis of this data is to be found in the articles of X. Dai and P. Norton (eds), *The Internet and Parliamentary Democracy in Europe, special issue, The Journal of Legislative Studies*.
- 42 A. Trechsel, *et al.*, *Evaluation of The Use of New technologies in Order to facilitate Democracy in Europe*, p. 8.
- 43 Interviews on 15 July 2005 and 21 June 2005.
- 44 Please note that local government in Portugal is a powerful structure, similar to the French case. This same observation was made by another Portuguese MP who has had responsibilities in a local council.
- 45 See data on this in R. Vicente-Merino, 'Websites of Parliamentarians across Europe', in X. Dai and P. Norton (eds), *The Internet and Parliamentary Democracy, special issue, The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13, (3), 2007 (forthcoming).
- 46 Some PGs use the virtual platform of FirstClass, for instance, for communication.
- 47 See as an illustration of this division, the figure in Portuguese Parliament, 'Use of Information and Communication Technologies at the Assembly of the Republic - 8th EPRI Conference', www.epri.org/epriknowledge/8th_EPRI_conference/Downloads.php, 2006, 13 February 2007.
- 48 For more details, see C. Leston-Bandeira, 'Are ICTs Changing Parliamentary Activity in the Portuguese Parliament?', in X. Dai and P. Norton (eds), *The Internet and Parliamentary Democracy, special issue, The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13, (3), 2007, (forthcoming).
- 49 C. Leston-Bandeira, *From Legislation to Legitimation: the Role of the Portuguese Parliament*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 42–4.
- 50 Interview on 2 March 2006.