The effectiveness of parliamentary information services in the United Kingdom
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Abstract

This paper describes the results of a pilot project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which explored the effectiveness of the public information and communications policies of the UK Parliament in London and the new devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The study consisted of two elements: a series of in-depth interviews with service providers; and interactive, electronically assisted interviews with the general public conducted in a roadshow environment. The paper focuses primarily on the results of the first stage of the research, relating these where appropriate to what was learned about user information behavior in the second stage.

Introduction and background to the research

This paper describes the results of a pilot study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which explored the effectiveness of parliamentary information and communications policies in the United Kingdom, in terms of the quality of public information services provided by the UK Parliament in London and the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The investigation consisted of two elements: a series of in-depth interviews with service providers, and interviews with the public carried out via roadshows across the UK. This paper focuses in particular on one aspect of the study, that is the nature of the parliamentary information services and the public's response to the parliamentary websites, which they were given an opportunity to explore during the roadshows.

The project sought in particular to contribute to the debate around the relationship between citizens' access to information and democratic participation, and to determine the extent to which groups thought to be in danger of social exclusion might be assisted by technologically supported approaches. The research examined critically the ways in which government realizes communication with the citizen, through new strategies emerging from notions of the 'Information Society' and of the role that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) play in encouraging public interaction with and participation in government. Transparency and openness are desired characteristics of communication which enable positive involvement and encourage consensus,[1] where individuals require access to information 'for successful … critical, participation in the accepted rights and responsibilities of government'.[2] The value of such access is two-fold, to the individual in exploiting rights and entitlements and to government in encouraging active citizenship, in line with the government/citizen information interchange model developed by the present authors.[3]

Recent dramatic constitutional change in the United Kingdom, in the form of the devolution of legislative power from central government in Westminster to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, has provided the impetus for government to restructure the processes of communication with the general public. The devolved legislatures hypothetically enable a more open and transparent style of government. The formation of the Scottish Parliament, for example, is seen as an ideal opportunity to:

> *'...put in place a new sort of democracy... an open, accessible Parliament; a Parliament where power is shared with the people; where people are encouraged to participate in the policy process which affects all our lives; an accountable visible Parliament...'* [4]

The present project tests the ways in which the various legislatures' information strategies support such a vision and the extent to which these strategies are succeeding in reaching and responding to the needs of users. It should also be emphasised that the process of decentralisation is set to continue with further devolution to regional assemblies across England.

The present study also coincides with major developments on public access to government information. The UK's Freedom of Information Act[5] finally received Royal Assent in November 2000, although full rights of access will not come into force until January 2005.[6] While the UK Act has received much criticism, both in terms of its content and the delay in its implementation,[7] the openness proposals of the devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales have been described as 'consciously aiming for higher standards'.[8] The Scottish Parliament passed the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act[9] in April 2002, which must be fully in force by the end of 2005; while the National Assembly for Wales has implemented a *Code of Practice on Public Access to Information*, now in its second edition.[10] In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, the Executive has established the Central Northern Ireland Freedom of Information Unit to oversee the implementation of the UK Act in the Province.[11]

In March 1999, the UK Government published a white paper on Crown Copyright,[12] which listed a number of categories of material from which Crown Copyright has been waived, and also announced the launch of an electronic Information Asset Register - *inforoute*[13] - which currently acts as a gateway and central information point to direct people to government information and materials.

Indeed, the UK Government has recently re-emphasised its commitment to 'information age government', setting a target of 2005 for all dealings with government - from looking for Employment Service job vacancies to filing tax returns - to be deliverable electronically.[14] Its strategic framework for e-government, based on the application of e-business methods throughout the public sector, was published in April 2000,[15] while a strategy for the electronic delivery of government services to the citizen was published in September 2000.[16] This latter document emphasises the need for electronic service delivery to be: joined-up; delivered through a range of channels; backed up by advice and support; open to the private and voluntary sectors;
competitive; and driven forward by government operating in new ways.

It is estimated that current household Internet penetration in the UK stands at 38% of households, although UK Internet users are not representative of the population as a whole: use is much less likely among older people and those on low incomes.[17] A key feature of the UK electronic government strategy, therefore, is the UK Online initiative, a national campaign aimed to ensure that everyone who wants it has access to the Internet by 2005. It is planned to meet this aim by establishing a network of 6,000 UK online centres, located in public libraries, schools, community centres, churches, etc. By June 2002, more than 3,000 UK online centres had been established across England, and it is predicted that by the end of 2002 around 99% of households in England will be within 5 miles of an Internet access point.[18] The UK Online initiative also includes the UK Online citizen portal, which provides a single online point of entry to over 900 government websites, including parliamentary and devolved assembly resources.[19]

The Scottish Executive published its own draft e-government framework in December 2000 and a revised version was published in May 2002.[20] It emphasises the Executive's commitment to delivering better public services which are designed to meet the needs of the citizen as consumer rather than those of the service provider. There is support for the development of third party intermediaries, or 'channels', for the delivery of these services, including public libraries, post offices, banks and Citizens Advice Bureaux. Indeed, a Public Internet Access Points Initiative was launched in April 2002, with a view to creating over 1,000 new access points throughout Scotland, primarily in areas where public access is currently poor.[21] A target parallel to that set by the UK Government - that all devolved public services in Scotland be available online by 2005 - has also been established.[22] By May 2002, more than 67% of services were available online, with the vast majority of these relating to information provision rather than transactional services.[23] There are also plans to create a Scottish Government portal, linked closely to the UK Online citizen portal.

The Northern Ireland Executive has also produced a corporate strategic framework for e-government.[24] It states that the creation of high quality, electronic government services, for those who wish to use them, should be based on four fundamental principles: choice, convenience, simplicity and inclusiveness. Targets have been set for the delivery of 25% of key government services electronically by the end of 2002, with 100% deliverable by 2005. A local citizen portal, OnlineNI, similar to UK Online but set in a Northern Ireland context, is also being developed.

In order to increase exploitation and use of government websites and to improve their quality and consistency, recently produced design guidelines emphasize the importance of: 'providing the information and services that users want'; the creation of a seamless mode of access organized around users' needs; the assurance of the users' 'right to expect' quality, accuracy and relevance; the encouragement of greater interactivity; and the development and use of systems to evaluate the extent to which users' needs are being met.[25] Given the present authors' focus on gathering data about users' needs and expectations, it is particularly gratifying to note this relatively recent acknowledgement of the importance of the user, reinforcing the conviction that such research is vital to the development of a governmental information strategy that not only meets stated needs but also anticipates unexpressed requirements. In order to achieve the latter an interpretivist exploratory approach is essential.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to investigate the impact of new technology on the communication of parliamentary information from the perspectives of both those in government and of the users of the information.

The objectives of the project were:
- *to develop a model of parliamentary information provision to the public in the United Kingdom in the context of a wider understanding of approaches globally*
- *to explore, in particular, the actual benefits/drawbacks of technologically supported approaches for certain groups deemed to be in danger of exclusion*
- *to develop and evaluate an interactive, electronic interview as a data collection tool employed as part of a pilot roadshow and to make recommendations for future application*

The present paper focuses primarily on the results of the first element in the study, that is the investigation of the UK Government's information policy as manifest in the public information services of Parliament and the devolved legislatures, relating these where appropriate to what has been learned about user information behavior in the second stage of the research.

Methodological approach

The project consisted of two elements: the first sought information from the managers of parliamentary public information services through a series of interviews about the nature, scope and objectives of the services; while the second stage consisted of interviews with the public, during which they explored parliamentary websites online and provided critical feedback on the quality of these resources. In the discussion which follows, the results of the interviews with service managers are presented in a discussion of each of the parliamentary public information services and this is followed by an analysis of the public's response to the parliamentary websites.

(1) Interviews with information service providers

Stage one of the project consisted of a series of face-to-face interviews with representatives of the House of Commons and House of Lords Information Offices – both situated at Westminster in London - the Scottish Parliament Public Information Service in Edinburgh and the National Assembly for Wales Public Information and Education Service in Cardiff, in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the vision, mission and strategies of the service providers and of the context in which services are operating. Each of the services was keen to assist with the research project and, in total, 18 interviews were conducted, between February 2001 and April 2001. The interviews were open and conducted flexibly, although built around a semi-structured schedule to ensure that all relevant aspects of service delivery were covered.

They gathered detailed data on the objectives and strategies of the services, and on the information access and dissemination activities used and developed by each. They also gathered information on the number and type of enquiries being made by the general public from statistics gathered by the services, and on the public's preferred methods of approaching the information services in the view of respondents. Particular attention was paid to the services' use of ICTs. All interviewees were open and informative in response, and their comments were recorded on audio tape for subsequent transcription and analysis.

(2) Roadshow interviews with the public

Methodologically, information behavior research has moved from a reliance on positivist surveys to the use of diverse methodologies combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling a holistic view of information need to emerge from the researcher getting 'close to the data'.[26] Wilson,[27] for example, has developed a methodology blending a qualitative approach with the collection of quantitative data on information behavior.

Research has also developed into human-computer interaction in information seeking, utilising instruments such as transaction log analysis[28] and verbal protocol analysis.[29, 30, 31] The present researchers have sought to combine these two approaches by developing a data collection tool – the electronically assisted interview – which simultaneously gathers qualitative and transactional data and which can be delivered on a scale capable of quantitative analysis. Drawing upon their previous experience of conducting large-scale surveys of the UK general public[32, 33, 34, 35] they have designed interviews which build a holistic and informed view of information behavior in a range of communities. The objective of the interactive, electronically-assisted interview was to explore the actual benefits or drawbacks of technologically supported approaches to parliamentary communication, particularly for those groups deemed to be in danger of exclusion. Roadshows, taken out across the UK, involved a researcher, aboard a minibus equipped with laptop and mobile data transmission equipment for Internet searching, interviewing members of the public while they explored parliamentary and devolved assembly websites. Despite concerns about reliability, mobile download times, although noticeably slower than with land-lines, were acceptable and stable, with only three (4%) of all interviews being affected by access problems. Back-up materials, on paper and on CD-ROM, remained useful, however. A transaction log software package was used to log invisibly all web pages visited during the online sessions, recording the date, time and complete Uniform Resource Locator (URL).

Interviews were carried out in three locations, in England (Newcastle upon Tyne), Scotland (Aberdeen) and Wales (Cardiff). Fifteen roadshows took place, five in each geographic area, between August 2001 and October 2001. The roadshow approach ensured that the events were taking place close to respondents' everyday lives and with minimal disruption to participants.

Table 1 illustrates patterns of response in each of the roadshow locations.

Host Organisation	Approached	Participated No.	Participated %	Too Busy	Not Interest.	Afraid of IT	Other
Gateshead Library	33	5	15	14	11	-	3
Age Concern, Newcastle	35	7	20	6	8	10	4
Sure Start, Newcastle ø	12	5	42	-	7	-	-
Park Rd Community Centre, Newcastle ø	29	1	3	17	11	-	-
Univ. of Northumbria	18	6	33	12	-	-	-
Rumney Lib., Cardiff ø	21	5	24	9	7	-	-
Grangetown Lib., Cardiff	22	3	14	8	11	-	-
Rhiwbina Lib., Cardiff	41	6	15	16	19	-	-
Age Concern, Barry	25	4	16	-	16	5	-
Cardiff University	55	9	16	30	16	-	-
Bressay Brae, Abdn.	20	3	15	-	17	-	-
Inverurie Library	41	11	27	12	18	-	-
Univ. of Aberdeen *	89	9	10	21	7	-	2
Aberdeen Mosque	12	2	17	-	8	-	2
Kincorth Lib., Aberdeen	13	3	23	4	6	-	-
Totals *	**466**	**79**	**17**	**149**	**162**	**15**	**11**

Over 460 people were approached and 79 were interviewed. This response rate of 17% is in line with similar surveys by, for example, doorstep interview.[36] The survey successfully gathered data from a representative body of individuals by characteristics such as age, ethnicity and gender, and was particularly successful in reaching older people and economically inactive women. A significant proportion of those approached, however, refused because they were not interested in the topic (48% of refusals) or too busy to participate (44%).

The interviews constituted a successful tool, gathering data illuminating respondents' search for and evaluation of parliamentary information in an electronic environment. To allow for open elicitation of respondents' thoughts, free-form online sessions utilized verbal protocol analysis, where respondents were asked to 'think aloud' as they searched, with prompts where necessary to elicit evaluative commentary. The interviews were recorded on audio tape and transcriptions were coded manually in a protocol analysis approach. Nineteen codes were constructed as the transcription progressed, reflecting the nature of comments made and behavior exhibited during the search sessions, by the interviewee and the interviewer.

(3) Success of the research approach

It is considered that the research approach described in this paper has been successful on a number of levels. It has gathered data from a broad and representative sample of the general public, a sample which would have been difficult to achieve via many of the alternative and more traditional approaches. Perhaps the only other method that might have reached these respondents would have been a survey by doorstep interview, however the online element of the electronically-assisted interview would not have been so readily achievable in such a context. It is also felt that the design of the interactive discussions that took place with respondents allowed a free and highly informative dialogue to take place. This ensured that views were being very openly elicited and yet were relevant to the research questions, as they were prompted by the experience of the online search. The design of the interviews allowed several types of data usually collected via discrete tools to be gathered at a single point, in a swift and reliably recorded manner.

Parliamentary and devolved assembly public information services in the United Kingdom

The results which follow are arranged in sections for each of the four parliamentary public information services in the United Kingdom:

    i.   The United Kingdom Parliament in London

    ii.   The Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh

    iii.   The National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff

    iv.   The Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast

In creating their public information services, the newly devolved administrations have drawn upon the experiences of the traditional UK Parliament in Westminster and in particular on that of the public information services of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

(i)   *The United Kingdom Parliament*

Established in 1978, the House of Commons Information Office's objective is 'to promote knowledge of the House of Commons amongst outside individuals and institutions'.[37] Its 19 staff answered almost 93,000 enquiries in 2001, with an increase of 53% in e-mail enquiries and a drop of 22% in telephone enquiries when compared with the previous year.

Interviewees felt that these changes in patterns of approach were largely due to the greater facility with which the public could access information and e-mail enquiries direct from the parliamentary website. Despite the fact that e-mail enquiries still represent a minority (just under 10%) of all enquiries received, service managers are aware that, as this type of demand inevitably continues to increase in future years with the shift in emphasis to electronic communications, they will face a significant management challenge. While standard responses to e-mail enquiries are used wherever possible, the majority have been found to require individual tailoring to meet users' needs, with the result that e-mail enquiries tend to involve greater staff input and entail longer response times than, for example, telephone enquiries. A sophisticated system of e-mail enquiry receipt and distribution to subject experts has been implemented by the service in an attempt to manage efficiently this growth in demand.

The largest user group comprises members of the public (44%), followed by the business community (24%) and the media (10%). The most frequent topics of enquiry concern information about individual Members of Parliament (33%), House of Commons business and debate (10%) and legislation (10%). Enquiries tend to increase when the House is debating high profile topics and large quantities of enquiry may result upon single topics, such as the public safety aspects of mobile telephony.

There is a good deal of evidence, from the experience of the interviewers, of public confusion as to the respective legislative and executive roles of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and Government, demonstrated by the frequency with which inappropriate enquiries are received by the Information Office.

In seeking to communicate information about the Parliament to the citizen, the service's publications are made available in hardcopy and in electronic form via their website. These range from the *Weekly Information Bulletin* to over 60 Factsheets on significant themes. Staff promote the House of Commons by receiving visitors at Westminster and giving talks to a wide range of interested groups. They also work closely with the information services of the devolved legislatures via an Interparliamentary Forum and a program of staff exchanges across all of the parliamentary and devolved assembly services. However, despite such efforts to share expertise and experience, interviewers felt that there was a lack of consensus on best practice with the various services adopting differing approaches in developing certain aspects of service. An inter-departmental Group on Information for the Public (GIP) has recently been established, charged with developing an overarching information strategy for the House of Commons.

The House of Lords (also known as the Upper House, its representatives consisting of Peers of the realm) has its own Information Office which aims to 'promote a better understanding and knowledge of the role and work of the House'.[38] Its four staff dealt with almost 20,000 telephone and 5,300 e-mail enquiries in 2000-01. E-mail enquiries constitute an even greater proportion of total enquiries (at over 20%) than for the House of Commons. Enquiries are typically concerned with the membership of the House (25%) and its business (25%). Again, high profile topics of debate cause dramatic increases. Major user groups include the general public, schools, lobbyists and journalists. Enquiries tend to demonstrate confusion as to the business of the House and the nature of its membership, with for example enquirers not realising that members of the House of Lords are not voted for by the electorate. The service publishes a guide to the House and a set of briefing papers on its role and work. Promotional efforts consist of the production of information packs and slide materials.

The Parliamentary Education Unit is aimed at teachers and young people, producing worksheets, videotapes and slides, and organising visits for young people and teacher training days. It hosts an educational website, *Explore Parliament*,[39] explaining the activities of Parliament, with interactive features.

The overarching UK Parliament website[40] was introduced in 1996, to enable free access to parliamentary papers and legislation and to 'encourage wider public interest in, and, knowledge of, the business of the House'.[41] The site's development has been erratic, with disaggregated responsibility for e-content resulting in an unapproachable site for the inexperienced. The site has presented navigational difficulties for those with little knowledge of parliamentary procedure and terminology. A redesigned site was launched in Summer 2002. A live webcasting service began in January 2002.

(ii) The Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament's Public Information Service was established in January 1999 with a view to ensuring that 'the Parliament is as open, accessible and participative as possible. Only well-informed citizens can maximize the opportunities … to contribute to the democratic process'.[42] The Service, influenced by that of the Swedish Parliament, consists of an Enquiry Unit, an Education Service and a Visitor Centre. It has a clearly stated set of aims - to ensure access to **all** members of the public, to increase interest in and contribution to the work of the Parliament and to provide high quality information that meets users' needs.

Over 7,400 extended enquiries were dealt with in 2000-01, of which 67% were made by telephone and 26% by e-mail.[43], [44] The latter tend to require an individualized response and greater staff effort, although same-day response is the norm. Around 43% of enquiries concern Parliamentary business or procedure, 18% relate to Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and 10% visits to the Parliament. A significant number are wrongly addressed (19%) and indicate confusion about the role of Parliament and the Scottish Executive. No record is kept of category of user in the statistics gathered about service use, despite the emphasis on users' needs in the Service's aims. The major published output consists of eight Factfiles on significant themes such as *You and Your MSP*.

The Visitor Centre attracted over 35,000 visitors in 2000-01 and has an information desk staffed by the Public Information Service. The Education Service caters for the wider educational community, offering visits to the Parliament (223 schools in 2000-01), events such as pupil conferences and parliaments, and an enquiry service for pupils undertaking projects. Promotional work is limited by the decision not to offer talks to groups, as it was felt that this would disadvantage remoter communities. However, Information Service staff are present at Committee meetings throughout Scotland, using these as an opportunity for outreach.

Reciprocal staff exchanges have taken place with the House of Commons and Welsh Assembly services, and staff are also represented at the Interparliamentary Forum: however, the Scottish service regards interaction as an opportunity to share good practice rather than to identify alternative approaches.

A network of 80 public library 'Partner Libraries' has been established across the 73 parliamentary constituencies, acting as a focal point for information about the Scottish Parliament, providing free access to the Parliament site (37% of libraries at present) and hosting MSPs' surgeries (18%).[45] In return, Partners receive free publications, support in answering enquiries and training in the use of parliamentary documentation.

The Scottish Parliament website[46] aims to provide 'a popular information service for the public, media and special interest groups'.[47] A webcasting facility broadcasts coverage of all proceedings and, in 2000-01, 6.5 million visits to individual website pages were made. The website contains a wide range of publicly accessible parliamentary information including the Official Report (the record of the proceedings of Parliament and its committees), Bills,

Business Bulletins, Outstanding Motions and Amendments, Standing Orders, annual reports, news releases and research papers.

(iii) National Assembly for Wales

The Welsh Assembly's Public Information and Education Service provides information to the public and aims to encourage growth in awareness and interest in its activities. It consists of 22 staff operating in three teams. The Information Line and Correspondence Service (part of the Visits Team) comprises two staff who handle approximately 120 telephone and 85 e-mail enquiries each week. Although standardized e-mail replies are used, the majority require individualized responses and the target is a three-day turn-around. Although no analysis takes place, requests for information about Members are frequent, as are those on policy. No data are held on category of user, but the business and educational communities are thought to predominate. There is public confusion over the distinction between devolved and reserved powers, while some enquirers believe their Assembly Member has replaced their UK Member of Parliament (MP).

The Assembly's Marketing and Communications Team attends major public events, with plans to increase outreach activities associated with Regional Committee meetings across Wales. Publications include a basic introduction to the work of the Assembly and a series of five information leaflets on Assembly business. All are available in Welsh and English. The Education Team organizes group visits, with over 80 taking place in 2000-01, and other special events, such as lectures by Assembly Members, 'Question Time' sessions in the Chamber and videoconferencing with schools.

Staff have visited the House of Commons and Scottish Parliament information services and attended the Interparliamentary Forum. Interviewees felt that these were very worthwhile activities.

As in Scotland, the Welsh service works with public libraries through their Information Link network, based (unlike Scotland) on a formal partnership agreement, where partners are given 'free and open access' to Assembly information in printed and electronic form. The Welsh service also has a publicly accessible Publications Centre, which receives significant numbers of telephone and e-mail enquiries, a model that the Scottish Parliament service will adopt in the move to its new Holyrood building.

The Welsh Assembly website[48] represents one of the Assembly's key approaches to openness, with the site forming an important part of the commitment to inclusion and access.[49] A variety of textual materials is available but no webcasting facilities. All materials are available in Welsh and English, with some items (e.g. the *Record of Proceedings*) presented in both languages simultaneously, with some concomitant slowing of download.

(iv) Northern Ireland Assembly

Although power was devolved to the new Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999, delays in the peace process have resulted in its public information service being less advanced than those in Wales and Scotland. With three staff, it does not currently have a mission statement, but reflects the desire for 'a high standard of information and communications systems' in support of the Assembly's aim to be 'as open, transparent, accessible and accountable as possible'.[50]

Although enquiries are not recorded systematically, they appear to be growing, with approximately 20-25 telephone enquiries a day from the public and 10-12 from the press. Approximately 20 e-mail enquiries are received each week. Again, 'popular' issues impact on numbers. Most enquiries are answered on the day of receipt and there is, as with the other services, public confusion between devolved and reserved matters. A *Weekly Information Bulletin* is produced, while an education programme for schools is planned. Although no visitor centre is proposed, tours of the Assembly building can be arranged.

The Assembly's website seeks to provide the kinds of information 'essential if the Assembly is to be an open and accountable body'.[51] It hosts Assembly documentation, information on the history of the Assembly and its representative Members, as well as live video broadcasts from the Chamber. It provides access to the usual range of publications, including the Official Report (Hansard), Order Papers, Minutes of Proceedings, All Party Notices, Standing Orders and Assembly and committee reports.

The public's response to the Parliamentary and Assembly websites

During the 15 roadshows, 79 interviews were conducted, 24 in Newcastle, 27 in Cardiff and 28 in Aberdeen. Forty interviewees were male, 39 female. There was an even spread by age across respondents, with only those under 20 (3 cases) poorly represented. Ethnic minorities

comprised just under 8% of the sample, a figure fairly representative of the UK population as a whole (estimated at 7%).[52] Just under a quarter (i.e. 19 of 79) of the respondents were economically active, considerably lower than the national figure of 50%,[53] while almost 40% (30 of 79) were retired. Given that the roadshows targeted less active members of the public, these figures are acceptable. Those respondents in employment tended to be in Socio-economic Classifications 1 and 2 (i.e. managerial and professional occupations). Almost half (37) had completed school education only, a third (25) had completed an undergraduate or higher degree, and one-fifth had completed a further education course. Over a quarter were currently studying for a university award.

Only six respondents (8%) described themselves as disabled. This response is lower than national estimates which range from 15%[54] to 17%.[55] Greater efforts are required to target this particular group via roadshows.

All 79 participants undertook a search for information on a subject of their own choice on one of the three parliamentary and devolved legislature websites, and were assisted in the process by the interviewer. Indeed, 23% of online search time consisted of the interviewer providing navigational instructions and advice, compared with just over 12% of unassisted search formulation on the part of the interviewees. These were the two protocols that occupied most of the think-aloud narratives. In terms of the website sections visited, the greatest proportion of online time (almost 20%) was devoted to using the search engines, although only 36 of the 79 participants used one of the search engines and those interviewees with highly specific searches spent disproportionately long on this activity. Participants also spent significant periods (13% of online time) on Home Pages exploring site content, while other popular areas included education pages, elected members' information and news sections.

Overall, 68 of the 79 participants believed that the website they examined was a useful information source and served a useful purpose. Various themes underpinned this sense of value: depth of information coverage (15 cases); reliability of information (13); ease of access (12); that access to Internet information resources represented 'the way ahead' (8); supporting education (3); and encouraging political interaction (2). Eight participants were concerned, however, about the means and costs of access; four felt the approach was more suited and more accessible for younger people; and one person preferred the media as a source. Two participants felt that the information was boring; two that it was of little interest to 'ordinary people'; and six expressed dissatisfaction with search functionality as experienced during their online roadshow activity.

In terms of ease of use, all three sites were rated favourably (the Scottish Parliament site was particularly highly rated). Of the 19 first-time computer users participating in this research, 17 felt the website had been easy to use. Equally, of the 32 participants aged 55 and over, only four recorded difficulties. However, it should be noted that the interviewer had played a more active role in assisting with the search process with many of the first-time users and older participants.

Sixty-one of the 79 participants felt that the information they had retrieved had been very or quite interesting (fewer for the UK Parliament site). Sixty-nine of the 79 found the retrieved information very or quite easy to understand, with the best ratings again recorded for the Scottish Parliament website. However, only 43 of the 79 respondents believed that the retrieved information was relevant to their lives, while 36 indicated that it was irrelevant (the UK Parliament site ranked least relevant).

When asked how they would go about finding more information on their chosen topics, respondents would utilize a range of approaches:

❑ Go back to the parliamentary website (19 cases);
❑ Use a general search engine (10);
❑ Consult the media (including websites) (6);
❑ Approach the administrative offices or the elected members of local (i.e. sub-national) government (5)
❑ Use libraries (5);
❑ Approach other governmental websites (4);
❑ Telephone experts (2);
❑ Approach political party websites (1);
❑ Approach interest group websites (1);
❑ Approach Assembly Members or the Assembly direct (10, all Wales).

Web sources were cited by 29 of the 46 participants who might search for further information, with 18 citing **only** online sources. Sixty-one of the 79 participants said they would use the parliamentary website again, suggesting that roadshow exposure might change behavior: however, only 10 of the 19 first-time computer users would do so. Various reasons for possible future visits were given, including: to support studies (16); to expand on media reports (6); work-related reasons (5); in relation to a personal problem or issue (5); jobseeking (1); pursuing environmental interests (1); and for local interest (1). Only 3 participants cited

political reasons: to support an interest in politics (1); to aid voting decisions (1); and to 'harass Welsh Assembly members' (1).

Participants saw the advantages of electronic access as: overcoming mobility problems; keeping up with other family members; as materials became less available in print; and improved access for rural communities. For those who would be unwilling to visit the parliamentary sites again the following factors were influential: lack of interest in politics (7); lack of interest in ICTs (2); lack of access to a computer (3, all retired); and an existing surfeit of information about politics (1).

Conclusions

Despite the enormous variation in scope of activities and resources found amongst the four public information services studied, they each shared a very similar overall vision of their role, in particular in terms of contributing to the achievement of more open, transparent and accessible government and in encouraging wider public interest in democratic activities.

Several common findings emerge from the interviews with the Public Information service providers, in terms of service effectiveness:

❑ That all service providers are encountering rapid growth in the incidence of e-mail enquiries;
❑ That, as a result of this growth, services will be under increased pressure, due to the fact that e-mail enquiries tend to require an individualized and time-consuming response;
❑ That the public are confused by the number and variety of legislative and executive bodies existing at the national level, in terms of their role, constitution, membership and powers;
❑ That although central government appears to have recognized the desirability of user focus and of consistency of approach across all official websites, there is a tendency for services (and even individual websites) to suffer from e-content creators' wish to 'go it alone' in terms of design; there was little evidence of consensus on best practice across the four services nor of a desire to explore alternative models on the part of some, despite the opportunities for exchange that have been established;
❑ That the existing complex pattern of information provision, matching as it does the complex political structure, is likely to be further exacerbated with further regional devolution of power in the United Kingdom.

The results would appear to indicate that the availability of information in readily accessible electronic form is not enough alone to encourage citizen participation. Other motivators and forms of support are required in order to encourage and enable people to access, use and apply that information and to encourage them to use ICTs to interact with democracy.

The model of parliamentary information communication to the public is one where two-way interaction is desirable, yet where the public may be unaware of or disinterested in such interaction. The issue of relevance is the single most significant factor in impacting upon user behavior. In order to encourage participation, communications via ICTs must visibly enable meaningful and useful interaction that is relevant to citizens' everyday lives.

The users studied as part of this research demonstrated a number of negative characteristics in terms of their willingness and capacity to exploit e-government resources. They tended to be uncertain about the purpose of legislative and executive agencies and consequently about the nature of the information that such agencies were likely to be able to offer on their websites. They found great difficulty in accessing relevant information in an accessible and comprehensible form; much of their online time was spent in navigation and retrieval processes. While the majority indicated that they would use electronic sources in the future, few felt that this was likely to be for reasons of democratic participation.

Equally, the project results do not suggest that excluded groups will be materially assisted by the simple availability of ICTs in their efforts to engage in democratic activities; in particular, older people faced real difficulties in handling the technology and the systems with which they were presented during roadshows, although it is worth noting that group exposure to websites stimulated interest in a greater proportion of older respondents.

The results also suggest that supported exposure to parliamentary websites may cause individuals to change behavior and develop new perspectives on the value of such information and that the roadshow concept is a valuable vehicle via which to enable such exposure while simultaneously gathering further data about user attitudes and needs.

Implications for future e-government activities in the United Kingdom

The project results suggest a number of implications for those developing and implementing e-government activities in the UK. While parliamentary public information services may seek to support via their websites open government and wider participation in political

activities, there are a number of barriers which must be overcome if that aspiration is to become a reality. Governmental agencies should be made aware of those barriers and alerted to ways in which practical steps might be taken to encourage the public broadly to explore online resources. The results of this project suggest that these might need to be proactive excursions into communities where advisors can discuss with individuals ways in which they might benefit from the use of new technologies.

Government websites must be designed with a view to the potential exploitation of e-content, in terms of attracting users to the site and ensuring that the visitor can locate useful information. There is clear evidence of continuing apathy on the part of the public, despite the availability of improved systems of access to government information. It may be that e-government initiatives can develop systems of navigation around resources that overcome the public confusion as to the role and constitution of public bodies. Navigation should be based on functionality and subject content rather than on existing hierarchies and relationships of power.

The parliamentary information services studied as part of this project, while already collaborating to an extent, should be very open to the potential of identifying best practice in other e-government initiatives nationally and internationally.

While there are some indications of a move towards a greater focus on the user in the design of government websites, much more research is needed looking at user needs, user behavior in seeking information and the application of that information to users' everyday lives before that process of design takes place. It is not enough to recognise the deficiencies of what we have at present, sound development should take place based upon what the public really need rather than what public services think is needed. The systems and resources designed as part of e-government initiatives must be function-driven and designed with a consciousness of the importance of removing barriers to their use by the public.

Although access to e-government by all may be realised in the strict and limited sense envisaged by the present government by 2005, real and active access by all would appear to be a remote possibility unless the three major issues of motivation, content relevance and ease of use are tackled as a priority. A radical re-think of the relationship between government information and the general public in terms of the ways in which this information affects individual lives is long overdue. Before the process of systems redesign is undertaken, such consideration must be given to the ways in which users can be encouraged to explore the potential of ICTs in participation in government-citizen interchange. An advisory group on

government e-content that can, in an informed manner, contribute to the debate from a variety of perspectives should be established without delay.

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