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## **The impact of new technology on the communication of parliamentary information**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the results of an exploratory study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which investigated the impact of technology on the communication of parliamentary information to the general public in the United Kingdom. As Stage 1 of the project, interviews were conducted with representatives of the public information services of the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Stage 2 consisted of interactive, electronically-assisted interviews, delivered in a roadshow environment, where members of the public were given the opportunity to explore, and provide critical feedback on, parliamentary websites.

**Keywords:** Parliament, political marketing, technology, United Kingdom

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper describes the results of a project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which explored the ways in which communication between government and the public was evolving in light of the potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular as a result of the provision of public information via the websites created to support the United Kingdom Parliament in Westminster and the new devolved legislatures - the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The project was designed to gather data both about the services hosting such sites, their strategies and approaches, and about the response of the general public to the sites, their levels of interest in and capacity to use such resources.

The project was devised in the context of the belief, increasingly prevalent in the early 1990s, that openness and transparency were desirable features of government. The benefits associated with openness related both to public service, with an informed electorate more able to weigh arguments, make decisions and take advantages of the opportunities available to them to improve their lives, enabling citizens to become knowledgeable actors (Mansell 2002), and to encouraging public familiarity and satisfaction with the institutions of government. There was also a belief that the use of technology in support of the provision of public information and e-government initiatives would facilitate and encourage public interaction with and participation in democracy, where individuals require access to public information 'for successful ... critical, participation in the accepted rights and responsibilities of government' (Policy Studies Institute 1995), and where citizenship is only realized when individuals are members of a socio-political community, with participation as a desired goal (Barbalet 1998; Mansbridge 1999). Such views were high on the political agenda throughout the 1990s. In late August 2001, President Bush claimed that 'it seems like to me the more accessible Washington becomes, the more likely it is people will participate in the [political] process' (Bush 2001). Alternatively, many see a growing trend in citizen empowerment as a result of the potential of new technology to enhance visibility, accountability and interaction in public administration (Kahlin 1997; La Porte, de Jong, and Demchak 1999; Welch and Wong 2001). It is also theorized that openness is increasingly a symbol of trust, modernity and global citizenship (Di Maggio and Powell 1983; Strang and Meyer 1993).

This shift in attitudes towards greater transparency is manifest in the United Kingdom, in a proliferation of official websites - at present calculated at well in excess of 1,000 distinct sites (UK Online 2003) - and in legislation, including the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information 1997 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000, due to be implemented in 2005. This move stemmed originally in Europe from the belief that greater openness and transparency would encourage consensus on the European institutions as a result of greater public understanding of and satisfaction with their activities, and in America from the Clinton administration's push for a more open Information Society, with improved communication between the government and the governed. This vision was to be achieved primarily via the use

of new web technologies, underpinned by the Freedom of Information Act 'providing the underlying principles of government openness' (Clinton 1993). Similarly in the UK, Blair (1996) argued that 'the only way to restore people's trust is therefore to be completely open' where there is 'a statutory obligation on the government to make it a duty to release information to the people who elect the government'.

Recent constitutional change in the UK decentralizing certain aspects of power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland via the establishment of devolved legislatures, with for example Scotland electing its first parliament for nearly 300 years, has also been envisaged by some as an opportunity to make government more open, accountable and closer to the people (Liberal Democrat Party 1998) in 'a new sort of democracy in Scotland ... an open, accessible Parliament ... where people are encouraged to participate in the policy process which affects all our lives ...' (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament 1998).

There was, therefore, in the 1990s identifiable global pressure towards openness and transparency which in the UK and the United States appeared to be reinforced by the domestic context, where information and technology developments were affecting the behaviour of public administrations (in line with Welch and Wong 2001). However, despite President Bush's reported remarks, as late as August 2001, about the importance of 'making sure that information flows freely' (Bush 2001), in the aftermath of the events of September 11th, in an environment of awareness of the threat of terrorism and with the growing likelihood of war with Iraq, there has been clear evidence of a realignment of position, a backlash against the perceived dangers implicit in too great an openness. This is evident in a number of developments, such as the emergence in the United States of the concept of homeland security, which although now in common parlance is still an evolving policy concept with very clear information policy implications (Relyea 2002), and the establishment of the Office of Homeland Security and the Homeland Security Council in America (both exempt from freedom of information regulation), the US Patriot Act (2001), the UK Anti Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill (2001) and the delayed implementation of the Freedom of Information Act in the UK, which some argue indicates 'a growing sense of unease with the PM about the breadth of the Act and an uncertainty about openness and the implications of September 11th' (Birkenshaw 2002). Feinberg (2002) believes that there are very serious implications as a result of the terrorist attacks (both September 11 and the anthrax threats) for information policy in the United States, arguing that 'the parameters are rapidly changing, and there are a number of contradictory factors simultaneously restricting and expanding access to different kinds of information'. Similarly Franklin (2003), in a summary of anti-FOI measures in America, reports the emerging view that 'the administration has used a string of laws and executive orders to reverse a decades-long trend toward government openness ... where it is impossible to say whether officials are merely protecting national security or simply expanding their power to operate without public scrutiny'. American journalists have also expressed concern at increasing secrecy in government, with the Ashcroft memorandum weighting decisions on public access against disclosure (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

There are also signs that e-government initiatives are in danger of failing, both at a process and ideological level. In the UK, e-government focus on use of web technologies has evolved around a strategy that emphasises the achievement of 'all dealings with government' accessible to the public by 2005, where the Office of the e-Envoy reports on a monthly basis to the Prime Minister on matters such as Internet penetration into UK households (38% in July 2002) and the progress of the UK Online initiative, aimed at ensuring that 99% of UK households will be located within five miles of an Internet access point. UK Online has been the subject of a national advertising campaign, although from informal tests carried out by the authors amongst technologically aware young people, who might be expected to be more responsive to the initiative than the majority, none were able to recall the meaning of the advert, although they did actually recall seeing it, suggesting that this high cost campaign may have been singularly ineffective. Similarly, a MORI survey (Anonymous 2000) found that more than a half of those surveyed either did not know or care what the government was doing to broaden access to the net.

Progress is evident in transformation via e-government although diminished by lack of resources, with 'true digitalized constituent services' appearing on the web, where, although the 'rhetoric is still oustripping the reality', greater emphasis in websites on transactional convenience is making their use more relevant to people's lives (Perlman 2002). Musso, Weare, and Hale (2000) identify two dimensions of local government web use – the entrepreneurial, focusing on good service management, and the participatory, in support of democracy – with entrepreneurial more commonly encountered. Greater availability of government department and public organization websites enables citizens to monitor organizational performance more readily (Reichard 1998), although there is evidence of variability in the extent of openness (Cyberspace Policy Research Group 2001). However, the Pew Internet Report (Larsen and Rainie 2002) indicates that, post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, there are increasingly fewer opportunities on government websites to engage in policy or issue related debate.

E-government strategy is being reappraised in recognition of the lack of consistency, quality and value attached to many government websites, where the mere fact of hosting a site has been seen by managers as more important than aspirations to internal validity and the achievement of relevance to people's lives. Recent website design guidelines emphasise the importance of 'providing the information and services that users want' and evaluating the extent to which 'users' needs and expectations are being met' (Office of the e-Envoy 2002a). However, there is no evidence that such research will be carried out in a systematic, objective and holistic manner, as it must be if information and communication strategy is to develop in a way that is responsive to public need rather than reflective of governmental desire to communicate a message or to enable an activity or process. A survey of Internet users (BBC 2002) shows that 'fewer than one in 20 Internet users regularly used government websites to access public services' and that less than a third of the population has ever visited a government website. Excluded groups, amongst the

heaviest users of government services, were not being reached and means of encouraging more traffic to government sites must be found.

Larsen and Rainie (2002) surveyed public use of government Internet sites in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, finding that 815 of 2,391 respondents had used government websites to locate information about terrorism and the Taliban, suggesting that in a crisis situation a significant proportion of the public will now use this means of accessing fuller or hypothetically more authoritative information about a crisis than is available in the mass media. Equally over one million electronic requests for the UK Government's Iraq Dossier were received in the first few days after its publication. The Office of the e-Envoy (2002b) interprets this as a confirmation of the Prime Minister's belief in the effectiveness of the Internet as a means of transmitting a message without the normal forms of mediation, interpretation and, potentially, criticism to which political messages are conventionally subject when disseminated via the media.

Although originally conceived in an information science research context, it has become evident that the present research has direct applicability to political marketing theory. Most research to date has focused on marketing political parties (see, for example, Mauser 1983; Kavanagh 1997; Lees-Marshment 2001; Maarek 1995; Newman 1999; and Sherman and Schiffman 2002) and politicians (such as, for example, Jackson, 2002, and 2003, on MPs' use of email and the Internet), while the marketing of parliament and communication between parliament and the general public has been little studied. Taking a pure information science approach involves the examination of the quality of the dissemination of information to the public, in terms of the information itself, the means by which it is disseminated and the value of the information to the eventual user. Political marketing theory on the contrary looks at the intentions of the information provider (i.e. the political party or parliament), the quality of the communication process and the extent to which communication with the public has assisted in the achievement of the provider's aims. In the case of parliamentary communication those aims would be to engage the electorate with parliament and its representatives and to encourage awareness of parliament and its relevance to the lives of the general public. In order to achieve such aims, parliaments may draw on marketing communication theory where models such as AIDA and DAGMAR emphasise the importance of achieving awareness and interest before a potential buyer will reach a decision and take action (AIDA). Information scientists have frequently assumed that the information user will make this leap to understanding that information has value, without pausing to examine the necessity for awareness of information value to be aroused and the means by which awareness might best be achieved.

The debate is further complicated by the political environment of legislatures, where officials, not themselves politicians, may see a need to 'inform and explain' rather than to market the political process (Winetrobe, 2002). Yet Mortimore (2002) argues that 'the need for the marketing of politics, as opposed to political marketing, is now an urgent one' in the context of diminishing

political participation, as evidenced by falling voter turnout, and public disenchantment with politicians. Fox and Lees-Marshment (2002) note that Westminster is limited in terms of political marketing development, suggesting ways in which it might become more market-oriented, including the provision of greater opportunity for outsiders to interact with and influence parliament. Seaton (2002) queries the legitimacy of the Scottish Parliament expending resources on marketing itself, asking whether it is possible for this to be done without becoming embroiled in politics, arguing that while parliamentary officers can disseminate information about and promote the process, they must seek to market the process but not the politicians. This paradox lies, in the view of the authors of the present paper, at the centre of the conjunction of information science and political marketing research, where the emphasis must shift beyond the public service model to embrace marketing approaches to political communication.

### **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 that information. Project objectives, therefore, included to:

- develop a model of parliamentary information provision to the public in the UK in the context of approaches globally;
- explore, in particular, the actual benefits/drawbacks of technologically supported approaches for certain groups deemed to be in danger of exclusion; and
- develop and evaluate an interactive, electronic interview as a data collection tool delivered in a roadshow environment.

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Two methodologies were adopted to gather data from informants: (i) semi-structured interviews with the managers of public information services and (ii) interactive, electronically assisted interviews with the public, during which they were given the opportunity to evaluate parliamentary websites. Eighteen face-to-face interviews were carried out with managers of the public information services - the House of Commons and House of Lords Information Offices, the Scottish Parliament Public Information Service and the National Assembly for Wales Public Information and Education Service. A telephone interview was conducted with a representative of the Northern Ireland Assembly Information Office. Although built around a semi-structured schedule, the interviews were open and conducted flexibly, in order to elicit unpredicted responses. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. They centred around the following areas: service objectives and strategies; information access and dissemination approaches; services' understanding and knowledge of users, from internal data collected and experience; and the role of information and communication technologies as part of the overall service strategy.

A new data collection tool was devised for interviews with the public, combining the collection of observational and attitudinal data in a single interaction, in order to explore behaviour from a phenomenological and context-based perspective. As the study involved the piloting of a new tool, the methodology has been very fully described and evaluated elsewhere (Marcella, Baxter, and Moore 2003). The interview sought data about respondents' previous experience of using government information, their attitude to accessing government information via a variety of media and their response to the parliamentary and assembly websites which they were being given the opportunity to explore. Interviews were carried out in Aberdeen, Newcastle and Cardiff, at 15 roadshow events held in community centres, public libraries, academic institutions and a mosque. Over 460 people were approached and although only 79 agreed to participate – those who declined cited a lack of time and a lack of interest in politics – it was felt that this response rate (17%) was not dissimilar to that achieved in many doorstep and on-street surveys. The interviews were successful in gathering rich data illuminating respondents' search for and evaluation of public information in an electronic environment. The free-form part of the interview utilized verbal protocol analysis, where respondents were asked to think aloud as they searched, with prompts to encourage evaluation. The interviews were audio-recorded, while the online sessions were logged simultaneously.

## PROJECT RESULTS

### **Parliamentary and Assembly Public Information Services**

The interviews with representatives of the four parliamentary and assembly public information services began by discussing their mission. Each emphasized themes associated with communicating with and raising awareness, interest and participation amongst the public: to 'promote knowledge of the House of Commons amongst outside individuals and institutions' (House of Commons Library 2001); to 'promote a better understanding and knowledge of the role and work of the House' (House of Lords 2001); to ensure that 'the Parliament is as open, accessible and participative as possible. Only well-informed citizens can maximise the opportunities ... to contribute to the democratic process' (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament 1998); and to be 'as open, transparent, accessible and accountable as possible' (Fee 1999, of the Northern Ireland Assembly). The overarching UK Parliament website 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' (House of Commons Information Committee 1996). The Scottish Parliament's public information service, heavily influenced by the Swedish model, has additionally a very 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.

Services vary markedly in size and scope, with approximately 93,000 enquiries at the House of Commons service and 25,000 at the House of Lords, while the Scottish service received only 7,400 enquiries annually: the Welsh and Northern Ireland services could not provide statistics but estimated approximately 200 enquiries each week in Wales and 120 in Northern Ireland. All services noted a very marked increase in e-mail enquiries, with around a quarter of all approaches taking this form at the time of the research: the House of Commons, for example, reported a 53% increase in e-mail enquiries and a 22% drop in telephone enquiries over the previous year. The emphasis on e-mail as a form of asking questions was considered to be potentially problematic by all services, in that staff felt that although standard responses could be developed for certain questions, these were frequently inappropriate or insufficient. In light of respondents' belief that e-mail will continue to increase, service managers were concerned about their capacity to continue to provide a meaningful and relatively speedy response without additional resources.

Major user groups for the services constituted the general public, the business community, representatives of the media, lobbyists and schools. All services noted a rise in the rate of enquiry when political topics were high on the media agenda. Otherwise the emphasis was on questions about parliamentary or assembly business, legislation, policy, membership of the body and the arrangement of visits. Highly significantly all services noted major confusion amongst enquirers as to the role of the respective body and its relationship with others, with in particular a lack of understanding of the nature of devolved and reserved matters, of the respective roles of the Commons, Lords and Government and of the nature of the membership of particular bodies. This uncertainty was manifest in the frequency of queries revealing uncertainty and misunderstanding. The services each produce a range of print and electronic publications, such as guides to the parliament or assembly, information packs, bulletins and thematic briefings. Staff of the services also receive visitors and give talks, with the Welsh Assembly's Marketing and Communications Team particularly active in organising exhibitions at major public events, such as agricultural shows and cultural festivals, and in outreach activities associated with Regional Committee meetings across Wales. Although it has a Visitor Centre, with an information desk, the Scottish Parliament service has taken a unique strategic decision not to offer talks to interested groups in order not to disadvantage remoter communities. Information service staff have, however, accompanied committee meetings held throughout Scotland, providing an opportunity for outreach. All of the services host tailored services aimed at young people, with a remit to support educational initiatives and encourage understanding of government; these include extensive visits programmes for schools.

Each service hosts a website, with the Scottish Parliament site, for example, fairly typical in aiming to provide 'a popular information service for the public, media and special interest groups' (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2000). The UK Parliament reported an erratic development pattern for their site, with disaggregated responsibility for e-content resulting in an unapproachable site for the inexperienced. The site presented navigational difficulties for those inexperienced in parliamentary procedure and terminology, although a redesigned version has since

been launched. A live webcasting service began in January 2002. A unique site aimed at young people, *Explore Parliament*, explains the activities of Parliament, with interactive features. The Scottish Parliament site hosts a webcasting facility broadcasting coverage of all proceedings and, in 2000-01, 6.5 million visits to website pages were made. However, this statistic indicates the number of individual pages viewed rather than the number of discrete visits made to the site. The Welsh Assembly website is regarded as a key approach in enabling openness, demonstrating commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. A variety of textual materials is available (in Welsh and English), and a pilot webcasting service is to run until April 2003. The Northern Ireland Assembly's website seeks to provide the kinds of information 'essential if the Assembly is to be an open and accountable body' (Fee 1999). It hosts Assembly documentation, information on the history and membership, as well as live video broadcasts from the Chamber. Parliamentary websites currently make no effort to contextualise their content in terms of users' lives, although UK Online, the national gateway site, does try to direct users to relevant material in terms of 14 key life events, which include having a baby, looking for a job, moving home and death and bereavement. Further development of this approach would be helpful, although it is clearly necessary for e-content designers to think beyond the fairly limited categories so far devised.

Staff of the Westminster and devolved information services seek to share good practice via an Interparliamentary Forum and reciprocal staff exchanges, although respondents reported a lack of consensus across the group. The Scottish and Welsh services have developed a systematic regional approach. In Scotland, a network of 80 public library 'Partner Libraries' has been established, acting as a focal point for information about Parliament, providing free access to the Parliament site and hosting MSPs' surgeries (Scottish Parliament Information Centre 2001). The Welsh service works with public libraries through an Information Link network, based on a formal partnership agreement, with 'free and open access' to Assembly information. There is no indication as yet that the Westminster and Northern Ireland services will adopt this approach. The Welsh service also has a publicly accessible Publications Centre.

### **User Information Behaviour**

*Respondent Demographics.* 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 poorly represented. Ethnic minorities comprised just under 8%, a figure in line with that for the UK population as a whole. Just under a quarter (i.e. 19 of 79) of the respondents were economically active, considerably lower than the national figure, while almost 40% (30 of 79) were retired. Those respondents in employment tended to be in Socio-economic Classifications 1 and 2 (i.e. in 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. Six respondents (8%) described themselves as disabled.

*Parliamentary Information Need, Participation and Use of ICTs.* Only 20 respondents had previously tried to find parliamentary information. Sixteen had sought information on the UK Parliament; three on the National Assembly for Wales; and six on the Scottish Parliament. Those who had sought parliamentary information had required information about: legislation (14 cases); constituencies and elected members (three); general interest (two); policy (one); parliamentary job vacancies (one); and student loans (one). Much of the material sought was required for educational reasons. Of the 69 respondents eligible to vote, 60 (87%) claimed to have voted at the 2001 General Election. This is a far higher figure than the actual national turnout of 58%, the lowest since the First World War (Gould 2001). Similarly 59% indicated that they had voted in the 1999 European Parliament Elections: actual turnout in the UK was 23%, the lowest in the Union (BBC 1999). Either the respondents were atypically active politically or they were over-reporting. Conversely, when asked if they otherwise participated in the political process, only 19 were involved in: informal discussion (nine cases), party membership (three), pressure group membership (two), distributing political material (one), contact with local councillors (one), directorship of a political club (one), administration of the Campaign for a Welsh Parliament (one), and mock elections at school (one).

Forty-eight respondents were regular computer users and 60 (of 79) used a computer at least occasionally. Just under a quarter were first-time computer users, although fear of the technology may have deterred some potential interviewees. Eighty-five per cent of those who had used a computer found them very or quite easy to use. Forty-seven respondents had previously used the Internet, and 11 of those had previously sought parliamentary information on the Internet.

*Free-form Information Seeking.* Table 1 illustrates the type of search undertaken.

Type of search	Website			Totals
	UK Parliament	Nat. Assembly for Wales	Scottish Parliament	
Search for info on specific topic(s)	10	19	10	39
General browse leading to specific search	2	1	4	7
General browse	12	7	14	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>79</b>

Just under half (39 of 79) looked for information on a specific topic, while 33 browsed generally. Seven browsed initially then began a specific search. Eighteen selected topics from a list offered by the researchers, while the other 28 chose their own topic. Information was found on the majority of topics selected, both general and very specific. They frequently looked for topics with local significance or for information about their parliamentary or Assembly Member. Thirteen participants (all aged over 45) refused to use the mouse. Of these, 11 were first-time while two were occasional computer users. The 76 online search sessions (six worked in pairs) varied considerably in length, from three to 45 minutes, with an average of 17 minutes. Factors affecting duration included: the time the respondent had to spare; level of interest in information found; and data download times.

Although the greatest proportion of online time (almost 20%) was devoted to using search engines, only 35 of the 76 searches involved any use of the search engine and those interviewees with highly specific searches spent disproportionately long on this activity. Respondents also spent significant periods (13%) on Home Pages exploring site content. Emphasising the need for navigational support, 23% of search time consisted of the interviewer providing instructions and advice, compared with only 12% of unassisted search formulation on the part of the interviewee. Experienced computer users were less reliant on advice and guidance. Of the 37 respondents whose protocols occupied 60% or more of online time, 31 were regular computer users; while of the 42 whose protocols occupied less than 60% of the time, only 17 were experienced.

A number of interesting findings emerge from the protocol analysis:

- ❑ Users frequently combined a specific search with browsing activity.
- ❑ Time spent in formulating searches ranged from just under one minute for a basic search to over 31 minutes for a highly specific search.
- ❑ Technologically experienced respondents required less interviewer support in searching.
- ❑ Search engine queries were less successful than those conducted via website menu structures.
- ❑ Users did not consult online search help facilities.
- ❑ Searches were conducted largely via keywords, with some use of limiters, such as date or type of document, often with no understanding of the significance of the latter.
- ❑ Searches tended to result in unmanageable numbers of hits, through which users began to browse but quickly became dissatisfied and discontinued the search.
- ❑ Searchers tended not to use full search functionality – only one used Boolean operators – and were unfamiliar with phrase matching.
- ❑ Inexperienced computer users required interviewer guidance on a variety of basic features.
- ❑ Much of users' online time involved reading internally and digesting information.
- ❑ The frequency of excessively large documents, with long download times, discouraged users.
- ❑ The Scottish Parliament website search engine was particularly frustrating in seeking exact phrase matches for any two keywords entered together, resulting in very low numbers of hits.
- ❑ Respondents frequently made qualitative comments about websites visited:

- a) Positive comments - on quantity and usefulness of information, ease of use of children's sections (for adults), detail available and ability to e-mail a Minister.
  - b) Negative comments - website design features, text legibility, poor site structure, and broken and interrupted hypertext links.
- Users used roadshow interviews to discuss broader political issues, such as the Government, Parliament and Assembly buildings, and political participation. The roadshow approach was found to have great potential in eliciting such data.
  - Many respondents also freely contributed personal information about their past use of computers, their newspaper reading habits, education, career choices and so on.

*Evaluative Feedback on Parliamentary Websites.* Overall 68 of the 79 participants believed that the website they examined was a useful information source. Various themes underpinned this sense of value: depth of information coverage (15 cases); reliability of information (13); ease of access (12); that this was 'the way ahead' (eight); educational role (three); and encouraging political interaction (two). Eight participants were concerned, however, about the means and costs of access; four felt the approach more suited to 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. In terms of ease of use, all three sites were rated favourably (in particular the Scottish Parliament site). Of the 19 first-time computer users, 17 felt the website had been easy to use. Equally, of the 32 participants aged 55 and over, only four recorded difficulties, perhaps influenced by the help the interviewer provided. Sixty-one of the 79 participants felt that the retrieved information had been very or quite interesting (fewer for the UK Parliament site). Sixty-nine of the 79 found the retrieved information easy to understand. However, only 43 of the 79 respondents believed that the retrieved information was relevant to their lives, while 36 indicated that it was irrelevant.

If seeking more information on their chosen topics, respondents would: go back to the parliamentary website (19 cases); use a general search engine (10); consult the media (including websites) (six); approach local council or councillors (five); use libraries (five); approach other governmental websites (four); telephone experts (two); approach political party websites (one); approach interest group websites (one); 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 behaviour: however, only 10 of the 19 first-time computer users would do so. Various reasons for possible future visits were given, including: educational (16); to expand on media reports (six); work-related (five); for a personal problem or issue (five); jobseeking (one); environmental interests (one); and local interest (one). Only three participants cited political reasons: an interest in politics (one); making voting decisions (one); and to 'harass Welsh Assembly members' (one). Participants saw advantages in electronic access as: overcoming mobility problems; keeping up with family members; materials becoming less available in print; and improved access for rural

communities. For those unwilling to visit the parliamentary sites again, the following factors were influential: lack of interest in politics (seven); lack of interest in ICTs (two); lack of access to a computer (three, all retired); and an existing surfeit of information about politics (one).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the present project was a pilot and its findings should, therefore, be regarded with some caution, 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 (in line with Perlman (2002)). Those responsible for developing parliamentary ICT policy must reappraise early beliefs about the power of electronic communication to transform the democratic process. In the light of the present study and increasing levels of political disengagement and disenchantment, it is important to recognise that, while electronic communication has the power to enable and make connections with the public, the connection will presently only take place as a result of active effort on the part of a public which is not inclined to make that effort. Serious consideration must be given to ways of encouraging information use, whether via marketing and promotional efforts or through education. However, the failure of UK Online's costly television advertising campaign should serve as a reminder of the difficulties associated with marketing abstract concepts like information and communication. The issue of relevance is the single most significant factor impacting upon user information behaviour. In order to encourage participation, communication via ICTs must visibly enable meaningful and useful interaction that is relevant to citizens' everyday lives, not only process-oriented interaction but also issue debate. Despite the evidence that interactivity is highly desirable, there are also signs that debate is being downplayed on many governmental sites in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, with very few opportunities today for visitors to express their opinions on the issues of the day in any kind of public way. Government agencies are now alert to the dangers of unmediated and uncontrolled public debate, dangers unanticipated at the height of enthusiasm for openness in public administration. As early as 2000, Coward reported that the Downing Street chatroom was attracting unwelcome and highly critical contributions which screening failed to control, suggesting naivety in original conceptions of real-time chat as a medium for open debate.

The wider availability of ICTs is changing the model of interaction between the public and government, evidenced in the significant growth of e-mail use by members of the public as a means of communicating their questions about government. However, there are also signs of concern amongst service managers about the implications of this shift and the extent to which it requires a greater frequency of personalised response than previously. The public information services of the various legislatures studied as part of this project have varying interpretations of their role, although they each emphasized notions of encouraging and promoting interest and awareness and of supporting the creation and maintenance of a well informed public. From the

evidence they presented, however, it is clear that the public they presently serve is not well informed, indeed is very frequently confused and uncertain, and that - although there are certain predictable areas of information need - needs are likely to be driven by the often unpredictable political agenda of the day and to be highly influenced by media coverage of that agenda. Lack of consistency and disaggregation in service provision (both of the physical services and their corresponding websites) and lack of meaningful data about users are issues for concern. Research remains necessary to explore the extent of use (actual and potential) and its nature, going beyond the assembling of statistics normally undertaken by services, in particular in light of recent concerns about the unresponsiveness and lack of appeal demonstrated by government websites. The focus on electronic provision of services also remains a concern in light of the project's findings which suggest that particular groups, such as the elderly and those without experience of or expertise in ICTs, are likely to be unwilling or unable to take full advantage of this means of communication. However, the results of this project also suggest that supported exposure to parliamentary websites may cause individuals to change attitudes and behaviour and to develop new perspectives on the value of such information, while verifying that the roadshow concept is a valuable vehicle via which to enable such exposure while simultaneously gathering further data about user attitudes to public access to government information and ICTs.

The present research findings illustrate deficiencies in parliamentary information and communication strategies from a public service perspective, where websites are failing to engage the public with e-content: future research should broaden its scope to consider the relationship between public service and political marketing models, going beyond studies of users' needs for information about parliament and the relationship of such information to their everyday lives to consider how political marketing theories and techniques might be applied to increase awareness of political websites and retain visitor interest in their content. Studies must also reflect on the distinction between marketing politicians and marketing the political process in an apolitical way.

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