Technology: Enhancing Representative Democracy in the UK?

A report on the use of new communication technologies in Westminster and the devolved legislatures

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Foreword
Rt Hon Michael Martin MP, The Speaker

As President of the Hansard Society, I'm particularly pleased to welcome this timely report on the use of new communication technologies in Westminster and the devolved UK legislatures.

In common with most developed democracies, we face falling voter turnout and lower levels of public participation in civic life. This disengagement from the conventional processes of parliamentary democracy offers a serious challenge and the internet, as it develops as a communication and information tool, brings fresh opportunities to connect citizens to the democratic institutions which serve them.

The Westminster Parliament, in common with the devolved legislatures of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, has made significant advances in the use of ICTs in recent years. The ultimate aim is, of course, to enhance parliamentary democracy and increase accountability and openness. But installing the technology is just the first step. We must examine how we use that technology to inform and engage those we represent. We must ensure that our parliamentary web sites are useful, informative and responsive. Most importantly, we must listen to the views of those we represent in order to develop a more responsive relationship between parliamentarians and electors.

The development of ICT offers tremendous possibilities for engaging citizens in two-way democracy. The use of online consultations and the gathering of evidence can enhance both legislative decision-making and scrutiny. The Hansard Society has pioneered research into the use of new technologies to connect citizens with those who represent them and this report gives us significant insights into how the Westminster Parliament and the devolved legislatures have responded to these new channels of connection.

This report gives us significant feedback on the opportunities and challenges which lie ahead, both for individual members of parliament and for the way in which the parliaments and assemblies themselves work. It offers us all some substantial pointers to future developments and I commend it to you.
Foreword

Rt Hon Sir David Steel MSP, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament

Information technology has changed almost every walk of life, including politics, since I became an MP in the 1960s. Information solutions to better government at the click of a button, political analysis from all over the world in seconds - fast, accurate information and communication that, quite frankly, has revolutionised politics.

The Scottish Parliament has been very ambitious in the way it uses technology to ensure participation and in informing people about our work, from our web site to e-petitioning to online discussion forums.

E-petitioning was one of our first innovations insofar as the Scottish Parliament was set up to accept petitions online and not just on paper. We have now expanded this to enable people to create petitions online, meaning groups of people can come together, create a petition, vote on its content and when it is ready, it can be sent to the Scottish Parliament - all done electronically.

In the most recent poll carried out by the Guardian on Parliament web sites of the world, the Scottish Parliament fares extremely well, scoring eight out of 10, second only to Sweden. It goes on to say our site is lively and interesting and is the most comprehensive of all the parliamentary sites. It offers easy access to the latest news as well as in-depth profiles of MSPs.

All our members have PCs and laptops. Operating as a modern business, access to information is crucial, as are effective channels of communication. MSPs cover constituencies all across Scotland and it is essential that they have ready access both to Edinburgh and their home constituencies.

It is my view that we are responding to the modern age and we in the Scottish Parliament have done so a little more rapidly and are more ahead of the game than our colleagues south of the border.

In the final analysis, our Parliament could not hope to meet the aspirations of being truly open, accessible and share the democratic power with the people of Scotland had it not embraced the information age. The Scottish Parliament is delivering quality legislation in consultation with the people of Scotland. A lot of the issues of the Scottish Parliament are bread and butter issues and we will continue to make sure all Scots can have their say, not just by writing a letter to the paper, but by having access to their MSPs through innovative technology.

I am very clear that to share power truly with the people of Scotland we must employ technology not just to allow Scots ready access to information but to allow them to participate in the democratic process.

This interesting report brings into focus the work being carried out using communication technologies in the United Kingdom legislatures. We must do all we can to promote technology in the firm belief that it will make representative democracy stronger and more effective.
Foreword

Lord Alderdice MLA, Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Many of our problems in Northern Ireland stemmed from a sense of exclusion of nationalists from the organs of the provincial governance, but also of unionists from the wider United Kingdom. The new dispensation is characterised in its constitutional and operational processes by a commitment to inclusivity. While this is most notable in its involvement of the elected representatives of the two major traditions, the stated aims of the politicians are to produce openness, transparency, accountability and accessibility for all the people of Northern Ireland. The use of information technology gives us a chance to respond to the local and unique aspects of our work and to involve all our people in decision-making about our community.

ICT has had a positive influence on the constituency work of individual MLAs. It has also led to improved efficiency in running the Assembly and better communication with our electors. We are now experimenting with more radical changes by encouraging committees to take evidence and even to operate in different places at the same time using conference links. How far will this revolution take us? The printing press revolutionised religion, politics, the economy, and society as a whole. Now ICT challenges the existing political order. The individual citizen can be empowered at the expense of governments and even of political parties, as the global protestors have shown. Some of our fundamental values as democrats — freedom of speech, equality of access, the opportunity for individual development — can be reinforced by this revolution. On the other side, the speed of communication can diminish the time to reflect — making for superficial decisions, informed by more data, but weakened by less judgement. This report helps us reflect on how we are measuring up to the information challenges facing our democratic institutions in the United Kingdom. I congratulate Stephen Coleman for the service he has done us by producing it and commend it to you.
Foreword

Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas AM, Presiding Officer,
National Assembly for Wales

The National Assembly for Wales has harnessed the opportunities provided by the emerging technologies to accelerate the development of a transparent and inclusive political process. Plenary and committee business papers are provided for Assembly members in electronic format. Our Chamberweb provides members with instant access to all relevant documentation and with e-mailing facilities at their seats in the Chamber. Votes are also cast electronically.

Agendas, business papers, committee and cabinet minutes are posted on the National Assembly website and made available to the public. The Record of Proceedings, the bilingual verbatim report of plenary proceedings, is also published on the site and therefore easily accessible. Public participation in the democratic process is enhanced by the ease with which any voter can access information or contact their Assembly member by e-mail. Access to information is central to enhancing participation and we are committed to making this as widely available as possible.

We believe that 21st century information communication technology challenges all elected representatives to work more openly with the public and provides new opportunities for the electorate to participate in the democratic process and influence the decisions made by politicians. The National Assembly Advisory Group, in its report to the Secretary of State for Wales, recommended that: 'the procedures adopted by the Assembly should be designed to create an Assembly which is democratic and inclusive'.

We are committed to releasing the potential of new technologies to make this a reality for people in the remotest parts of Wales. The effect that ICT will have on democracy depends not on the technology itself, but rather on the way we choose to use it for the benefit of the public. Whilst much remains to be done, we are confident that an excellent start has been made and I welcome this report to highlight the need to enhance the interaction between the public and their elected representatives.
Chapter One

Doing Politics Differently?

This Government's progressive programme of constitutional reform is now moving us from a centralised Britain, where power flowed top-down, to a devolved and plural state. ¹

Something of a quiet revolution has been taking place in UK politics. Democracy has started to look rather different over the past few years. What has been going on?

Firstly, there has been a political will to decentralise power and bring democratic representation closer to the people who are represented. Traditionally, UK politics was remarkably centralised in London – indeed, within the 'political village' in central London, in Westminster and Whitehall. The policy of devolution has created new bodies of representation and legislation in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, with the purpose of bringing politics 'home' to those UK citizens who have felt disconnected from London-based democracy. This aspiration to root politics within place, culture and experience signifies a new and refreshing direction for UK democracy.

Secondly, there has been a growing recognition that institutions of governance have lost touch with an increasingly disengaged and disenchanted citizenry and that innovatory methods are needed to build trust between politicians and the people. From citizens' juries to deliberative polls and consensus conferences, innovatory methods of public participation in policy formation and decision-making have been adopted. The UK House of Commons Public Administration Committee's report on its inquiry into public participation concluded that 'the period since the middle 1990s has seen an explosion of interest in involving the public more frequently, more extensively, and in much more diverse ways in the conduct of decision-making within the public services'. ²

Alongside these efforts to modernise – or even re-invent – democracy, the emergence of digital technologies has given rise to hopes for a more accountable and interactive form of governance. The internet has facilitated new ways of shopping, banking, learning and delivering government services. Might it be used as a tool for bridging the communication chasm between citizens and their representatives? Robin Cook, who chairs the new UK Cabinet committee on e-democracy, has argued that:

There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors. ³

This is an important perspective: if technology is regarded as possessing autonomous qualities that can remedy the ills of democracy, it is bound to let us down; but if it can be utilised in the
service of creative policies to make democratic politics more accessible, accountable and inclusive, there is real scope for the reinvigoration of governance.

The coincidence between the creation of the new devolved legislatures and the emergence of the internet resulted in some high hopes. So, in the report of the Consultative Steering Group, which set out the formative principles for the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the following principles were set out for the use of information and communication technology (ICT):

- it should be innovative;
- it should allow the Parliament to develop its use of ICT in a planned and coherent way;
- it should seize the opportunities which modern, well-designed information systems offer for improving openness, accessibility and responsiveness to the people of Scotland;
- it should aspire to be an example of best practice in Parliamentary information systems, both in terms of external communications and internal efficiency;
- it should lay the basis for delivering the business of the Parliament efficiently and effectively.

Integrating digital technologies into the work of the new legislatures was but one manifestation of an aspiration to ‘do politics differently’. Westminster was regarded by the architects of the devolved institutions as a model of how not to run a representative assembly. The ‘yaboo’ behaviour of tribal parties was disdained and there was talk of the new legislatures encouraging a new, more consensual style of politics. Practices and procedures designed to bring representation closer to the people characterised the early period of devolved institution-building. The extent to which these aspirations have been realised during the short lives of the new legislatures is a matter for debate. Alun Michael, the former First Minister in the National Assembly for Wales, argued in his inaugural lecture at the Institute of Welsh Studies that devolution had established a different style of government for Wales:

*The new politics is more open. Take the example of subject committees, each with a majority of non-Labour members, two-thirds chaired by a member of one of the other parties. Every fortnight, they question Assembly Secretaries and their officials on their actions – and they do so in public. And they are much more than scrutiny committees. They take an active part in policy development. Committees are currently preparing reports on issues as diverse as post-16 education and training, nursery provision for three-year-olds, drug-prescribing in the National Health Service. And anyone with access to the internet can find out what is going on in the Assembly simply by logging on to the Assembly’s web site.*

On the other hand, critics have argued that the hopes for “new politics” have been shown to be somewhat illusory as intense party competition has simply been reconfigured in a new context. Regardless of the wider debate about the success of UK devolution, there can be no doubt that the devolved legislatures present us with important lessons; that precisely because they have emerged within a society pervaded by the influence of the internet and other digital technologies, they offer us an opportunity to see how these technologies might or might not enhance democratic representation. That is the aim of this study.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study has been to examine the ways in which ICT has been used within the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures (the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly) and to consider the effects of such use upon the representative process.

The first stage of the study involved compiling an account of how ICT is being used in the four legislatures in our study. This was pursued by carrying out extensive interviews with key officials within the four institutions.

The second stage of research aimed to assess the extent to which ICT were making the four legislatures open to and interactive with the publics that they represent. Four aspects were examined:

1. The parliament/assembly web sites. These are important online entrances to the new legislatures. How inviting, informative and interactive are they? We recruited a panel of four experts who analysed and scored the sites on the basis of agreed criteria.

2. The use of e-mail by representatives. E-mail is now widely used by UK citizens, the number of e-mails posted daily in the UK exceeds the number of letters sent through the mail. How open are representatives to connecting with their constituents via e-mail? Anecdotal evidence abounds concerning politicians who refuse to use e-mail because they fear being overwhelmed or flooded with messages from non-constituents. We wanted to know how representatives are actually dealing with e-mails. How many do they receive? What proportion come from non-constituents? How would they prefer to be contacted? A telephone survey of 100 office assistants and managers from all four legislatures helped us to establish some clearer knowledge in response to these questions.

3. The use of online consultation and discussion forums. These offer a way of feeding public experience and expertise into the legislative process. How far are they being used and with what effects? Have we entered an age of two-way democracy, where representatives and represented have transcended the barriers of geographical and cultural distance which once separated them, or are the digital feedback paths of ICT still to be utilised for the enhancement of democratic representation? We conducted a detailed content analysis of several legislative online consultations with a view to establishing how they are being used.

4. The expectations of the public. Does the internet bring the UK public closer to its parliament? And what about the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish publics and their legislatures? Is there a public agenda for e-democracies to which legislators should be listening? We commissioned a poll from yougov, involving representative samples of citizens from the four nations of the UK.
Chapter Two

Towards E-Legislatures

In 1994 the UK Parliament conducted a comparative survey of the use of ICT by European legislatures and found that only Turkey was behind the UK in its use of ICT to support its parliamentarians. As the second oldest parliament in the world (after Ireland's), which had already lived through the disruption of one revolution in new technology (namely, the rise of print), Westminster was distinctly cautious about the e-revolution which was exciting politicians such as Newt Gingrich and Al Gore in the USA. By 1996 Westminster came to recognise the value of ICT as a parliamentary resource: an intranet (the Parliamentary Data and Video Network – PDVN) was provided for all members with appropriate computers and a website was established on which the daily report of Parliament's proceedings (Hansard) was made available freely to the public. The UK Parliament had entered the new information age.

Since 1996 the main developments in Westminster have involved the establishment of the new parliamentary building, Portcullis House, which is fully e-connected and includes an e-library, and new rules for the funding and procurement of MPs' IT equipment, which still requires MPs to pay for their own computers, but now ensures that these are purchased at special rates from an approved list of centrally procured appliances. So, the absurd situation where up to half of all MPs' computers in Parliament were incompatible with the PDVN or parliamentary e-mail system no longer prevails.

Chart 1 • Representatives with websites
Since 2001, each of the 659 UK MPs have been provided by Parliament with up to three computers, one laptop, an e-mail account and connection to the parliamentary intranet. From their own money they must purchase internet connections, networks with their constituency offices, mobile phones and palm tops.

Although all UK MPs are provided with e-mail addresses, only 480 (73%) currently have functioning e-mail accounts. 255 (30%) of UK MPs have their own web sites. According to unpublished research by Nigel Jackson, 'the Labour Party has 62% of all MPs and 59.1% of those with web sites. The Conservative Party has 25% of all seats and 28% of MPs online. The Liberal Democrats have 8% of the total of MPs but 11.8% of those with web sites.'6 In the devolved legislatures there are biographical web pages for all representatives attached to the official web sites, but only a minority of MSPs, AMs and MLAs have their own web sites. 42 out of 129 MSPs have their own web sites; only 9 out of 60 AMs have personal web sites. 19 out of 108 MLAs have their own web sites.

There is not a consistent pattern in the provision of ICT equipment to members of the four legislatures, as the following table shows:

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<th>Laptop</th>
<th>Connection to Internet</th>
<th>Connection to Intranet</th>
<th>Network to constituency</th>
<th>Mobile phone</th>
<th>Palm top</th>
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<td>Northern Ireland</td>
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</tbody>
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* UK MPs are given internet access and network links to their constituencies, but most do not use this system because it only provides limited access to the internet.

In reality, giving equipment to members is not the issue: representatives can be e-enabled in all kinds of ways, but if they do not choose to utilise ICT or lack the skills to do so, and if the use of ICT is not integrated into the working practices and cultures of the legislature, little will change. In the devolved legislatures, two factors have been more important than the provision of kit: the design of the new buildings and the adoption of principles of openness and accessibility.

The Westminster Parliament was originally built as a medieval palace and its main chamber modelled on a chapel. It has evolved much over the centuries, not least in response to fires and bombing, but it is essentially a prisoner of its architecture. Apart from the new Portcullis House, which has very much the look and feel of the devolved legislatures, it has been difficult to wire up Westminster and all innovations in ICT use have had to force their way into an uninviting structure.

By contrast, the National Assembly for Wales meets in a new building which has been specifically designed to house a 21st century legislature. From day one, the Assembly has invested heavily in e-enabled services: each AM has access to his or her own electronic console on the floor of the Assembly, votes electronically, has a state-of-the-art office and e-links to the constituency office. Officials in Wales argue that some of the initial investment was inappropriate and that there would be a different strategy if they were starting again now; this is the price paid by most early adopters of ICT. But the National Assembly for Wales expects to operate on a high-tech basis and this encourages innovation and a willingness to think in digital terms.
The Scottish Parliament has also had to start from scratch, adopting at the outset a positive commitment to ICT. But Scotland has benefited additionally from two other factors: firstly, the fact that its new parliamentary home at Holyrood was not built when the parliament started in 1999, so there has been time to learn from experience in a temporary home and design the new building on the basis of a far-seeing vision; and secondly, the Scottish Parliament has converged its ICT and broadcasting operations (largely as a result of the fact that, unlike in Westminster and Cardiff, no broadcaster has committed to providing gavel-to-gavel coverage) and this has enabled the Parliament to adopt the benefits of converging technologies which others are still thinking about. All sessions of the Scottish Parliament are web cast live. This has recently started as an experiment in the UK Parliament but, because of the traditional division between broadcasters (who are independent of Parliament) and the web producers (who are parliamentary staff) web casting of Westminster is very much dependent upon the decision of external broadcasters to pay for coverage.

As important as architecture is ethos. Part of the aspiration to ‘do politics differently’ has been a determination by the devolved legislatures to be transparently accountable to the public on the public’s own terms. Westminster has traditionally regarded the public as ‘strangers’ and it has taken until 2002 to establish a place for visitors to sit down and have a cup of tea. Allan Black, the Director of IT at the Northern Ireland Assembly, seeks to set the new legislature in a non-Westminster mould: ‘We want to be seen to be effective, efficient and modern – to throw off the traces of history that Westminster brings with it.’

The Consultative Steering Group which set up the new parliament in Edinburgh set out the explicit principle that ‘the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation.’ A consequence of this defining ethos has been the recruitment of staff specifically charged with increasing public accountability and participation.
Chapter Three

Evaluating Web Sites

It seems that everyone these days has to have a web site, even though many are not quite sure what they have one for. Legislatures are no different. Most now have their own web sites; in some cases, the purpose and functions of 'parliamentary' web sites are less than clear. Perhaps the best and simplest rationale for legislatures having web sites was stated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in its useful Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites: 'Web sites make the legislative process and parliamentary proceedings more transparent and subject to closer public scrutiny.'

For this research, an expert panel was asked to evaluate the web sites of the UK Parliament (www.parliament.uk), the Scottish Parliament (www.scottish.parliament.uk), the National Assembly for Wales (www.wales.gov.uk) and the Northern Ireland Assembly (www.ni-assembly.gov.uk). The panel comprised Dr Gilly Salmon, Senior Lecturer in e-learning at the Open University; Dr John Gotze, e-democracy adviser to the Danish Government; John Powner, design principal at Atelier Works; and Jeremy Shtern, who is studying for his MSC in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The panel was asked to score the sites on a scale of one to five on the basis of criteria relating to site content and design.

Content was evaluated in relation to information and education, service provision and the promotion of active citizenship. Evaluation questions included:

- Does this site provide useful information about the purpose, history and procedures of the legislature?
- Does it provide information about the people involved in the legislature, such as sitting members?
- Is there information about the upcoming legislative programme and other events that might be of public interest?
- Does the site take into account differing educational levels and backgrounds of users?
- Are resources from elsewhere on the web used or linked to?
- Does this site facilitate services, such as ordering documents, applying for jobs within the legislature or finding out about public contracts?
- Is public participation in the process of policy formation or feedback being encouraged on the site?
- How much of the legislature’s business can be followed from the site through available documents, press releases and web casting?
- Does this site increase the opportunity for citizens to involve themselves in the process of governance?
Design was evaluated in relation to accessibility, usability, interactivity and personalisation and the use of innovatory features. Evaluation questions included:

- How accessible is this site to those possessing limited technical or computer literacy?
- Are the site instructions simple to follow?
- Is information unnecessarily packaged in applications which are difficult or require higher than minimal technical specifications from the user's system?
- Does the chosen design best support the content and mandate of the site?
- Does the site solicit the involvement of users and allow them to engage the material in a personal way?
- Does this site offer information in a way which most takes advantage of the unique communicative potential of the world wide web?
- Does using the web site make information easier to find, and provide more information in one stop, than other sources could?

Before considering the panel's scores, there are two points that should be understood. Firstly, it is unhelpful to regard this subjective assessment as 'passing' or 'failing' any web sites. The value of the exercise had much more to do with setting out criteria for evaluation than arriving at scores. Secondly, the UK Parliament web site was evaluated in May 2002, shortly before the launch of a long-awaited new parliamentary web site which we were not able to evaluate.

Chart 2 • Web site Audit Results: Average Scores Awarded for Content
Chart 3 • Web site Audit Results: Average Scores Awarded for Design

Chart 4 • Web site Audit Results: Average Overall Score
The Scottish Parliament's web site was rated most highly in terms of design and content, followed by the UK and Welsh sites for content and the Welsh site for design. The expert panel made a number of general as well as specific comments about each of the sites. Overall, three observations stood out:

- **Firstly**, the sites seem confused about their mission and purpose. There is an apparent lack of clarity about who their audiences are. Most visitors to legislative web sites are not there to find out how the legislature works, but to seek help regarding a particular problem or policy issue. The sites are too preoccupied with telling visitors 'This is who we are and this is how we do things' and not enough with 'How can we help you?'

- **Secondly**, our experts felt that the sites had fallen victim to the complexity of the institutions they are seeking to make transparent. Rather than offering everything to everyone, the sites need to be more segmented, with signposted opportunities to dig deeper for more complicated information and much simpler search engines leading to a narrower, more specific range of results. Our experts were concerned that 'uninitiated' visitors to these sites could be overwhelmed by the plethora of undifferentiated information, leaving them none the wiser than if it was not there at all.

- **Thirdly**, the sites offer little that is personalised or interactive. On the BBCi web site one can register and receive a personal greeting on return visits. Why can citizens not register on these legislative sites for regular updates about subjects of particular interest to them? Why not introduce an option to join e-mail lists to receive news and share information? At the moment, with the exception of experimental online consultations, there is no way for citizens to leave their footprints in the sand. This is examined further in the section on 'Interacting with the Public.'
Chapter Four

Adapting to E-Mail

For elected representatives, ICT has emerged as a ‘disruptive’ technology, upsetting routines and procedures that have enabled them to (just about) cope so far. There is a prevalent fear amongst politicians that e-mail could be the straw that will break the camel’s back, increasing the volume of inward communication to a point where it becomes overwhelming. A number of elected representatives have responded to e-mail overload by putting up barriers and refusing to accept it. This is not a sustainable position: citizens are used to e-mailing businesses, friends and public services and will not for long accept representatives who require them to conform to an old technology of communication.

Before considering e-mail in terms of rights – the citizens’ right to send e-mails to their representatives and the politician’s right to refuse to read them – it would be useful to know the magnitude of the problem. As research for this study, we contacted 100 members’ offices in the four legislatures: 25 in each. Our aim was to speak to office managers, members’ secretaries and research assistants to find out how much e-mail they were receiving and from whom.

We began by asking them how many (paper) letters from individual members of the public they received per week and how many e-mails. In Scotland and Northern Ireland e-mails exceeded letters.

Chart 5 • Average weekly post and e-mail correspondence received?
The graph (bottom left) shows the average weekly number of e-mails to representatives' offices per week. Although Westminster MPs receive half as many e-mails as paper letters from members of the public, their weekly volume of e-mail correspondence is almost as high as for MSPs, who receive more e-mails than letters.

Chart 6 • Public e-mail contact with representatives

We asked respondents to tell us whether they considered that the quality of e-mail correspondence was higher or lower than that of posted letters. In the UK and Scottish Parliaments there was a clear perception that e-mails were of lower quality.

Chart 7 • What is the quality of public e-mail correspondence when compared to posted correspondence?
We then asked respondents to say how they preferred constituents to communicate with them: by letter, telephone or e-mail. Responses to this question indicated that there is not just one preferred channel of communication with representatives. Northern Irish representatives preferred telephone contact and were not eager to receive posted letters. Welsh AMs preferred e-mail. In Scotland and the UK posted letters were preferred and most UK respondents in our sample reported a preference for telephone contact with constituents over e-mail.

Chart 8 • What is your preferred method of being contacted by constituents?

Finally, we asked how much e-mail from individual members of the public comes from non-constituents. This is important because in all legislatures there is a tradition that representatives should only deal with their own constituents. In Northern Ireland respondents estimated that more than half of e-mails received from the public were from non-constituents, and about two-fifths of e-mails to UK MPs and Scottish MSPs are from non-constituents.

Chart 9 • What percentage of your e-mail from the public comes from people outside of your constituency?
Chapter Five

Interacting with the Public

Central to the promise of ICT as a tool for democracy is its capacity to facilitate interaction between representatives and represented and nurture a more participatory culture of governance. As Robin Cook argued in his speech to the yougov conference, modern democracy must be seen as more than just the right to vote every few years:

Democracy must offer the right in between elections and the opportunity to shape the policies pursued by those who are elected. The internet offers us a tool for participation without precedent in our history … it provides for a two-way flow of communication and immediate response. Equally important is that it allows everyone taking part to see the responses of everyone else. It produces a healthy debate that allows the dialogue between participants to develop and not be confined solely to responding to an official document. 8

How have Westminster and the devolved legislatures lived up to this democratic aspiration? The first point to be noted is that hardly any legislatures in any country have so far put into practice e-consultation policies, although several have recently begun to look into the prospect of doing so. Outside of Scandinavia, the Baltic states, Australia and Canada, there are very few examples of attempts to use the internet to gather public evidence for legislative decision-making or scrutiny. 9

So, the fact that experimentation has taken place in three out of four of the UK legislatures indicates exceptional commitment to a more interactive democracy. These online consultations have been analysed by the Hansard Society, as part of a wider research project for the UK Cabinet Office; the statistics below come from that research.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has yet to run online consultations. This is hardly surprising: democratic institution-building there was bound to proceed in different ways from the rest of the UK.

Both the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales have run online consultations and are currently considering how to take these forward. There is a broad consensus that these new opportunities to use the internet to involve citizens in legislative debate have been worthwhile. Lesley Beddie, who is Director of Communications for the Scottish Parliament, thinks that online consultations ‘will become mainstream’, but that ‘the issue here is re-engagement, not technology.’ 10

George Walker, Senior Executive Officer, ICT Strategy Unit, National Assembly for Wales, is of the view that ‘although it is only a tool, there is a link between providing technology and decreasing the trend towards disenfranchisement.’ 11
Gareth Thomas, who is Deputy Head and Policy Researcher, Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales, told us about how some blind people in Wales reported that participating in online deliberation enabled them for the first time ever to observe the postings of others; and wheelchair users expressed the value of online consultations, saving them the difficulty of having to go in person to meetings in often inaccessible buildings. Officials at the National Assembly for Wales are currently working on designs for web-based consultation templates which could aid officials in setting up future online consultations, encourage more concise summaries of public contributions and monitor ways in which consultations are affecting policy.  

There have been nine Scottish online consultations promoted by individual MSPs and one promoted by a policy committee. An example of the former was an online consultation about the plight of chronic back pain sufferers, introduced by Dorothy Grace-Elder MSP. Although thousands visited the discussion, the number of messages submitted was small, but of a high quality. 105 messages were submitted, the majority from women. The largest proportion of these messages (38%) related personal experiences; just over one in 20 (6%) raised questions to other participants and 63% offered replies to previous contributors. The messages were considered in the Scottish Parliament in a debate Plight of Chronic Pain Patients on 27th February, 2002. The Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport committee's online consultation on The Purposes of Scottish Education has received only 23 messages at the time of writing (late May 2002; it has another month to run).

In Wales there has been only one online consultation so far: inviting citizens to comment on the Assembly's ICT Strategy for Wales. 191 messages were received in that forum: the vast majority (79%) were from men and most (78%) were messages of under 200 words. (A useful analysis of this consultation has been produced by Rebecca Ann Hill.)

Unlike the devolved legislatures, the UK Parliament has not yet run online consultations as an in-house operation, although at the time of writing the first ever draft Bill (the Communications Bill) is being opened to an online consultation, with regular summaries of public contributions being reported to meetings of the Bill committee. Previous online consultations for Westminster have been run by the independent Hansard Society; they have received support from the parliamentary authorities and a good deal of interest from politicians, but Parliament as an institution has sought an arm's-length relationship with these experimental initiatives. Policy issues considered in the Hansard Society-run consultations, which have been analysed and reported, have ranged from domestic violence (with almost 1000 messages contributed by women) to stem cell research, tax credits and flooding.

What can we learn from these experimental attempts to connect citizens to legislators via ICT?

Firstly, that they need to be publicised. The Hansard Society has always worked on the assumption that good online consultation requires production and recruitment, just as good televised debate does. This process is resource-intensive. Opening up new channels of debate has little value if it simply amplifies the voices of those who are already likely to be heard. Experimentation in this area must be linked to efforts to include traditionally unheard or marginalised groups. The emphasis of such initiatives needs to be on expanding participation as much as refining consultation.
Secondly, the value of these consultations centres upon the experience and expertise that citizens can bring to issues. There needs to be a safe atmosphere online where people can give their own accounts and deliberate in a respectful fashion. All too often online discussion (like much offline political discussion) descends into opinionated ranting and abuse. Avoiding this calls for expert design, moderation and agreed rules of engagement.

Thirdly, if these consultations are perceived to be tokenistic gestures by legislators they will soon be ignored by citizens. At the experimental stage there was an understandable ambivalence about the status of these online consultations, but if they are to become anything like routine features of parliamentary democracy they must be integrated within the decision-making process so that they carry constitutional weight. MSPs and AMs are conspicuous by their absence online within these discussion forums, raising new agenda issues or responding to specific messages. Of course, elected representatives have much else to do, but without their participation the public is unlikely to trust these consultations as conduits to the decision-making process. In the Westminster consultations several MPs did take part online, but the main assurance to citizens lay in the promise that a comprehensive summary of contributions would be produced by an independent third party (the Hansard Society) for the relevant parliamentary committee.

There is an evident public appetite for these opportunities to feed in experience and knowledge to representatives, as is clear from the poll findings in the next section. In an age of widespread public disengagement from the conventional processes of political democracy, there is much to be said for exploring the use of new channels which relate to the public desire to be heard and respected – and which relate specifically to the interests of age groups that are most alienated from politics.

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC WANT?

There is very little established knowledge about how the public wants to communicate with its representatives and how they perceive communication opportunities as they stand. In May 2002 a poll was conducted for this research by yougov.com. The poll comprised 1,098 citizens from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who had access to the internet. Of course, internet-connected citizens will give different answers from non-connected citizens. (A poll of both was conducted by MORI for the Hansard Society in 2001.) The purpose of this polling research was to discover how internet-connected citizens (who constitute about 40% of the UK population) experience communicating with their legislatures; whether these experiences differ between UK and devolved legislatures; and what they want in the future from their representatives at both UK and devolved levels.

We began by establishing how much contact our sample had with the UK and devolved legislatures. One in five had visited Westminster at some time. Men were almost twice as likely to have been than women were. Fewer than 10% of Scottish and Welsh respondents had visited their own devolved legislatures; twice as many had visited Westminster. One in four respondents had written to their UK MPs, but this differed greatly for different age groups: 41% of over-60 year-olds had written to their MPs, but only 9% of 25-29 year-olds. More than one in four (27%) of English respondents had written to their UK MP, but only 17% of Scottish respondents had done so. Fewer than one in 10 Scottish and Welsh respondents had contacted their MSPs or AMs. Northern Irish respondents in our sample were much more likely to write to both Westminster and Stormont than anyone else in the UK: one in four had done so.
Overall, one in four of our respondents (24%) had visited the UK Parliament web site. Men were more likely to have done so than women (26% and 19%) and 18-24 year-olds were significantly more likely to have done so (34%). Indeed, 18-24 year-olds were almost twice as likely to have visited the UK parliamentary web site than to have visited Westminster or written to their MP. There was no significant evidence that English respondents were more likely to visit the Westminster site than non-English respondents were. 25% of Scottish respondents had visited the Scottish Parliament web site and 35% from Northern Ireland had visited the Northern Ireland Assembly site. But only 12% of Welsh respondents had visited the National Assembly for Wales site; they were almost twice as likely to have visited the UK Parliament web site.

19% of respondents rated the UK web site as being good. 26% of Northern Irish respondents, 20% of Scottish respondents and 11% of Welsh respondents thought that their devolved legislature’s web sites were good. When asked how they would most likely look for information about their local MP, respondents selected the internet as their first source (44%), ahead of the local press (36%). 54% of 18-24 year-olds selected the internet, 23% ahead of any other source. 39% selected the internet as their first choice of information about their devolved representative, with 59% of under-30 year-olds selecting that option. These findings are consistent with results from research conducted in February 2002 by the UK Parliament, asking telephone callers, visitors and e-mailers to Parliament their preferred method of accessing parliamentary information. For all three groups online information was the first choice: 41% of phone callers preferred the web (equal with the number choosing telephone access), 59% of visitors chose the web (32% more than selected the second choice, which was telephone access) and 57% of e-mailers selected web access.15

How did respondents view the legislatures that represent them? We asked them to agree or disagree with the descriptions of legislatures as being ‘open and accessible’ or ‘aloof and inaccessible’. 57% regarded the Westminster Parliament as ‘aloof and inaccessible’. This was consistent across age groups and nations. There was a range of perceptions: half of the Northern Ireland respondents considered their Assembly ‘open and accessible’ and half considered it ‘aloof and inaccessible’. 26% of Scottish respondents considered their devolved Parliament ‘open and accessible’: a significantly higher rating than Westminster. But only 18% of Welsh respondents regarded the National Assembly for Wales as ‘open and accessible’: fewer than the Welsh rating of the UK Parliament, but still higher than the English rating of the UK Parliament.

We asked respondents to choose a priority from amongst three e-policies for legislatures:

A) all representatives to have regularly updated web sites with information about their views, recent speeches and voting records

B) an opportunity to contribute online to debates in the UK Parliament

C) an opportunity to contribute online to debates in the devolved legislatures

Over half of all respondents favoured option A. 28% supported option B and 17% supported option C. When these results were broken down to national samples, it became clear that Scottish and Northern Irish respondents were much more enthusiastic about C than B: they regarded
participation online in their own legislatures as a better opportunity than taking part in Westminster’s online debates. But Welsh respondents were clearly not of the same view: 24% fewer wanted to contribute to National Assembly for Wales online debates than Westminster debates.

Chart 10 • Which one of the following would you most like to see happen?

We then asked respondents to rate their support for various e-changes, on a scale from one to 10 (where 0 is not at all important and 10 is very important.) Taking 8-10 as indications of significant enthusiasm amongst respondents, the following degrees of support were identified:

- Responding by e-mail to e-mail from constituents: 63%
- Paying special attention to constituents not connected to the internet: 61%
- Publishing their speeches and press releases online: 56%
- Inviting constituents to discuss policy issues with them in online forums: 49%
- Using their mobiles as a mobile office: 15%
Although most respondents are concerned about the danger of non-internet-connected constituents being excluded from the democratic process (and this figure would be higher if those without internet access had been asked), they still expect their representatives to adapt to the e-mail age. 86% agreed that MPs should respond to constituents’ e-mails by e-mail and 87% of Scottish respondents expected the same from their MSPs. Welsh and Northern Irish respondents were less concerned about this.

Overall, has the internet changed the practice or culture of representative democracy? We asked two questions about this. Firstly, did respondents agree that 'the internet has helped to bring democracy closer to citizens?' Respondents were divided about this: 31% thought it had, 31% thought it had not and the rest did not know. 18-24 year-olds agreed with this more than average, as did over-50 year-olds. Secondly, are the devolved legislatures 'doing politics differently?' Across UK respondents, 29% agreed that they were; men were much more likely to think this than women. 57% of Northern Irish respondents thought that their Assembly was 'doing politics differently'; hardly surprising, considering that the political mood in Northern Ireland has changed dramatically since the period in which the Assembly was established. 32% of Scottish respondents thought that their Parliament was 'doing politics differently', but 42% thought that it was not. Welsh respondents were more positive about this: 25% considered that the National Assembly for Wales was 'doing politics differently' and 21% thought not – but most Welsh respondents reported that they did not know.
Chapter Six

Re-inventing Representation

A danger in research of this kind is to draw sweeping conclusions: either ICT has revolutionised the nature of democratic governance or it has made no difference at all; either devolution has been a hugely popular success and a flourishing example of ‘doing politics differently’ or it has been a miserable waste of time. No such conclusions will be offered here.

More radically, we do draw the conclusion that this is a period in which dynamic reconceptions of democratic representation are in the air. At the core of these reconceptions is the notion of bringing policy formation and decision-making closer to people, reconnecting it to their experiences, their modes of expression and their interests as stakeholders. The model of the citizen as a ‘stranger’ to parliamentary democracy is fast becoming obsolete. In a post-deferential society, those who are cast as strangers or outsiders soon disengage, as recent drops in electoral turnout reflect.

The devolved legislatures have been fortunate in being able to write their own rule books, unconstrained by the weight of a thousand years of tradition. They have adopted more informal styles of behaviour that have resulted in their being seen as more ‘normal’ than Westminster MPs, whose performance in the chamber onlookers sometimes regard as at best theatrical and at worst mystifyingly ritualistic.

Devolution is but one, highly important, strand of a broader programme to modernise governance in the UK. There has been the reform of the House of Lords; a new freedom of information law; the elections for local Mayors; the appointment of an e-envoy, the establishment of UK Online and the e-voting pilots in May 2002. The intention of these changes has been to close the chasm between citizens and state, represented and representatives. In December 2001 the Prime Minister established a Cabinet sub-committee to look at a policy for e-democracy. An essential principle of a UK e-democracy policy must be a recognition that there are several tiers of governance in the UK: local, national, devolved and European, as well as executive and legislative. Creating a joined-up democracy in which the citizen can connect with policy formation, decision-making and scrutiny at many levels could be greatly facilitated by ICT. The Hansard Society’s Seniorspeak consultation, in which older internet users have been discussing long-term care in an online forum that is linked with both the UK and Scottish Parliaments, is a good example of this. As governance and representation become more e-connected, there will be problems to tackle.

Firstly, representatives will need to adapt their working practices so that they are not overwhelmed by new channels of connection with the public. This is not a unique circumstance: all new technologies are initially disruptive, until people learn how to utilise them in their best interests. Every major corporation has had to learn to adapt to e-mail and new forms of customer relations in the digital age. Elected representatives must be helped to adapt to the e-world, for their sake and for the good of
democracy. It is unfair to criticise politicians for being out of step and resistant to change; all jobs are conducted within structures and if the structure does not adapt to accommodate new technologies there is no point in blaming those trapped within it.

Secondly, there is still a digital divide, with the number of citizens able to access the internet at home smaller than those who cannot. Approximately 40% of UK homes now have access to the internet, but access levels are 10% or more lower in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and those with access throughout the UK tend to be richer and better educated. Unless the internet is to become a tool for connecting the better off and more articulate, every effort must be made to promote digital inclusion for all. The Government target of enabling everyone who wants access to the internet to have it by 2005 is a commendable one, but people will not necessarily want to go online unless the content is there to motivate them. Bridging the digital divide must entail bridging the democratic divide between those who vote, lobby and expect to be heard and those who feel intimidated, confused and neglected by the democratic process. A campaign for digital inclusion should involve more than providing people with physical access to ICT; developing civic skills in imaginative ways that seem relevant to traditionally excluded sections of the population is just as important.

Thirdly, if e-democracy is to develop into an integral part of representative democracy, mechanisms for promoting public deliberation, embedding it within the constitutional process and demonstrating real links between public input and policy outcomes need to be devised. Public expectations need to be managed: e-democracy should not be seen as a recipe for direct democracy or technopopulism. But citizens will soon tire of contributing their thoughts and evidence to legislative deliberations, online or offline, if no apparent account is taken of them. The decision of the committee considering the draft Communications Bill in the UK Parliament to allow its proceedings to be webcast and evidence to be collected for it via an online discussion forum is an important step towards democratic interactivity between representatives and the people they represent. 16

The evidence from this research suggests that all legislatures, old and new, are in the early days of adapting to the digital world. The political cultures which shape legislatures are more important than the technologies utilised by them. But parliamentary democracy, like every other aspect of modern life, is changing, and will change further, as new technologies of information and communication become ubiquitous and routine. Democracy in 2050 will not be replaced by push-button plebiscites, with citizens voting on every law from their home computers. But we are moving towards a more connected, interactive and collaborative form of democracy.
Case Study – Anne Campbell MP

Shortly after I was elected to Parliament in 1992, I met a group of young women in my constituency. They told me that since becoming lone parents (not usually by choice), they had given up work and they were now finding it difficult or impossible to take any sort of job – even a part time one. One woman who was a science graduate told me how humiliating and depressing she found it. She said the worst part was not being able to buy her own copy of the New Scientist, she had to go to the library to read it.

There were difficulties in co-ordinating all the information needed to get back to work. A young mother without her own transport could find herself spending days travelling to the job centre, to social services to find out about childcare and the Department of Social Security to find out whether she could afford to take the job. At a meeting of local councillors, the CAB, Employment Service, and Department of Social Security representatives, we decided that a one-stop shop for information would be both feasible and useful.

It was rather groundbreaking in those days to even think about using the internet – I used to get just a handful of e-mails from constituents – but we launched Opportunity Links on the internet in 1994. I had help from Cambridge City Council and CambSTECC and a number of smaller contributions from Cambridge colleges, local firms and the banks. With the money that was raised we appointed our first project worker, Anderson Consulting designed our first web site and helped us with the project management.

We started with information on childcare, jobs, training courses and benefits advice. We have developed the site since then as can be seen at www.opportunity-links.org.uk. I was delighted that when the DfES decided to roll out their national childcare information strategy they came to Opportunity Links for help. We have assisted the development of the web site www.childcarelink.gov.uk and have helped childcare partnerships all over the UK to grapple with the technology and post up their own local information.

Now of course more people have access to the technology. My constituency office receives more correspondence on e-mail than through the post. Displaying this information on the internet no longer seems as crazy as it did in 1994. Its success is measured by the usage – over five million hits a month on the national childcare link web site and it is still rising. Opportunity Links goes from strength to strength and now employs around 50 people. It demonstrates that the internet is useful not just for business and academia but for social information too.

Case Study – Alun Cairns AM

There is no doubt that the establishment of a new institution allows for the incorporation of ICT equipment and facilities that would be almost impossible to achieve in older or more traditional organisations. This has been capitalised on by the National Assembly for Wales.

Each Assembly member has been provided with the hardware and software to facilitate their duties as AMs. The networking of all computers within the Assembly’s main buildings as well as AMs’ constituency offices at the outset provided the infrastructure to enable further development and to include evolving technology.

Video conferencing, therefore, is now available to each AM in their Assembly office as well as their constituency offices. As a result it is now possible to hold virtual constituency surgeries, i.e. surgeries via video conferencing equipment.

Naturally, this brings risks and opportunities, in a similar way that any change in working practice may bring in a different environment. However, assuming a common sense approach, the benefits to AMs and constituents could be enormous. In emergency circumstances, an impromptu surgery can be organised. There would be no need for the AM to travel miles to meet the constituent. All complaints could be aired ‘personally’ without the travel, over the conferencing system.

Furthermore, if a constituent had such a facility at home then the benefit would also be more obvious to them. Although this activity does not wholly replace the need and desire for one-to-one contact, there is no doubt that it can assist in making more time available to resolve the issues raised by the constituent.

Other available facilities include e-mail to and from the debating chamber. Each AM has a touch-sensitive screen at their sitting area in the chamber. This facility enables e-mails to be sent and received from within the Assembly network. The potential is, again, enormous.

As a result, a member of the public observing a live debate on television, in theory, can e-mail an AM’s office about a matter being debated. This e-mail can then be forwarded instantly to the AM in the Chamber by their research assistant or secretary. Such information can obviously then be used in a speech or appropriate intervention, enhancing the quality of debate, or even to correct a Minister!

Such a use of the information and communication technology has the potential to bring politics alive. In theory, there is the capacity to evolve an Assembly debate to be as reactive as a radio or television phone-in. Whether this is desirable or not is a matter for the individual or institution involved. Whatever that view, politics can be made more relevant to the people it is supposed to represent.
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