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The Hansard Society commissioned MORI to poll a representative sample of the public about what they want from politicians online. The poll was conducted between August 9 and 14, 2001; 1,921 adults aged over 18 were questioned in 194 sampling points across the UK. We were concerned to hear the opinions of those already online and also those who do not currently have internet access.

In addition, the Hansard Society conducted street interviews on camera (with the generous assistance of Millbank Studios) in August 2001. The quotes interspersed throughout this publication are from those street interviews.

The Hansard Society is grateful to BT for supporting the polling research and the production of this publication.

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1 The context
We are all learning to communicate in new ways. E-mail, web sites, mobile phones, text messaging and digital TV are reshaping public interaction. Parliament, as the apex of our democracy, cannot be impervious to these changes. The evidence from our polling – details of which are reported below – is that the public want MPs to be online and communicating interactively with them.

A new medium
As recently as five years ago, commentators could still get away with saying that the internet was an ephemeral fad, soon to fade from public notice. But like print in the 15th century and broadcasting in the last century, digital media are here for good, reshaping culture and expectations just as much as previous media did. Although there is still a long way to go before everyone in the UK has access to the internet and skills to use it, the speed of take-up has been phenomenal. In June 1997 only 2% of the UK population had access to the internet (not necessarily at home), rising to 18% at the end of 1998, 23% at the end of 1999 and 33% at the end of 2000. There have been 2.7 million new home users of the internet in the UK since the beginning of 2001, with a new user being connected every six seconds; in 2000 there were only 3 million new home users in the entire year.

Consumers and convenience
For better or for worse, citizens are increasingly consumer-minded. The public is concerned about the efficiency and quality of service delivery and does not differentiate significantly between commercially available services and those supplied by the Government. In June and July 2001, 30% of UK internet users went to the web to research or book holidays. In Birmingham, the digital Living Health channel provides interactive access to studio-based nurses and enables its users to book doctors' appointments online. From travel agents to banks to supermarkets to book publishers, service to the public is being adapted to the age of the internet.
Government is slower to move in this direction, but a commitment has been stated to make the UK 'the best place in the world to do e-business.' A target of putting all Government services online and providing internet access for all people who want it has been set for 2005. Just as commercial services are now available online, the public expects to have access to its elected representatives.

**Revitalising representation**

Parliament, as the democratically elected representative body of the nation, is in danger of being sidelined as Government enters into more direct contact with the public. In 1996, Parliament established a website, www.parliament.uk (which is currently undergoing a much-needed redesign), but still most MPs do not have web sites or publicise their e-mail addresses. MPs have a clear interest in building closer links with their constituents and working more interactively with communities that they represent, without distances from Westminster being a barrier.

At the moment MPs – as well as councillors and MEPs – might regard e-politics as an optional form of communication or the province of geeks and 'techies'. As e-mail overtakes post and web sites become the obvious place for the public to seek information, MPs will begin to realise the costs of not being online and, what's more, the costs of not being inventive and responsive in their online activities.

**Crisis of participation**

Whole sections of the population are currently turned off by parliamentary politics. Interestingly, many of those who are most turned off are most online. We know from research conducted during the 2001 election that young people went online in large numbers to seek information and engage in discussion. We also know that non-voters are not necessarily uninterested in political and social issues. If all that young people find when they go online are images of politics as usual – bland electronic brochures advertising party platforms and stage-managed discussions about agendas that do not interest them – then they will drift away from online politics to other areas. If politicians want to engage those who are switched off by conventional politics, they will need to be imaginative in their use of the new medium at their disposal.

**2 The poll findings**

The Hansard Society commissioned MORI to poll a representative sample of the public about what they want from politicians online. The poll was conducted between August 9 and 14, 2001; 1,921 adults aged over 18 were questioned in 194 sampling points across the UK. We were concerned to hear the opinions of those already online and also those who do not currently have internet access.

**Who's online?**

37% of respondents had a computer at home, but only 31% had home access to the internet. Of those with home access, there were three clear divisions:

- **i) Gender:**
  - Males with home internet access ..........38%
  - Females with home internet access ..........25%

- **ii) Age:**
  - 18-34 with home access .........................44%
  - 35-54 with home access ........................37%
  - 55+ with home access .............................13%

- **iii) Socio-economic class:**
  - ABs with home access ............................54%
  - C1s with home access ..............................37%
  - C2s with home access ..............................25%
  - DEs with home access ..............................14%
Whereas only 11% of respondents from households with an overall income of under £9,500 had home internet access, 53% of households earning over £25,000 had home access.

Liberal Democrat voters are 11% more likely to have home access to the internet than Labour voters and 10% more likely than Conservative voters.

Looking at other digital technologies, apart from the internet, the picture looks rather different. A clear majority of respondents (67%) possessed mobile phones – including a majority of socio-economic groups D and E. Although only 37% of the overall sample used text messaging (SMS), 70% of 18-24 year-olds used it, suggesting that this could become a significant communication route to younger citizens.

Over one in 10 (11%) of respondents had access to interactive digital TV, with C2s more likely to have this than ABs, and as many as 18% of 18-34 year-olds accessing this new medium.

**What people want from their MPs**

We offered the public a series of features that they might want their MPs to provide and asked them to say which would be most useful to them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing access to all Government services via the internet</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting via the internet</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public spaces being created on the web where people can debate policy issues</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All MPs using e-mail addresses</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All MPs having interactive web sites</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPs to be accessible via digital TV</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Younger respondents had slightly different priorities. 44% of 18-24 year-olds said they wanted to vote via the internet, but only 27% wanted Government services delivered online.

Those with internet access were almost twice as likely to want Government services delivered online as those without – and more than twice as likely to favour voting via the internet. Those without internet access were

So, 85% of respondents wanted MPs to provide one or more of the features listed. 96% of respondents with access to the internet favoured the introduction of one of the listed features, as opposed to 78% of those without access. Over half of respondents with internet access (54%) wanted online surgeries, compared to 30% of those currently without access. The younger the respondents were, the more enthusiastic they were for these features to be introduced.

It is clear from the preferences expressed that the public is less interested in being recipients of politician generated information (e-mail updates or the MPs’ daily diary) and more enthusiastic for interactive opportunities, so that they can drive the communication themselves, as in online surgeries, e-mail correspondence and online consultations.

**The next five years**

Which online services does the public most want to see in the next five years?
almost twice as likely as those with access to support the idea of accessing their MPs via digital TV.

Public concerns
The public is fairly enthusiastic about the prospects of using the internet to create a more effective democracy, but they are not without some concerns. We raised two of these concerns to see how important they are to people.

- Firstly, we asked people to agree or disagree with the statement that moving towards e-politics would be undemocratic because not everyone has access to the internet. Most respondents (65%) agreed with that, with 29% agreeing strongly. Older respondents were more likely to agree (67%) than 18-34 year-olds (60%). Those without internet access were more likely to agree strongly (34%) than those with access (21%).

- Secondly, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement that moving towards e-politics would be futile because politicians will not listen to what the public says. Again, 65% of respondents agreed with this proposition, with 28% agreeing strongly. 18-34 year-olds were less pessimistic about this (61%) than their elders (67%).

It is clear that the public accepts that the digital divide is a barrier to any kind of democratic use of the internet. Indeed, a move towards e-politics could serve to exacerbate this divide, by giving extra opportunities to the more affluent, more articulate, better educated and better connected. Looking at trends within the poll data, it is clear that better-off respondents are more enthusiastic about using the internet as a political resource than are the less well off. The following table shows this vividly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Household income under £9,500</th>
<th>Household income over £25,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing access to all Government services via the internet</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting via the internet</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public spaces being created on the web where people can debate policy issues:</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All MPs using e-mail addresses:</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All MPs having interactive web sites:</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPs to be accessible via digital TV:</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above:</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked to choose two
What do you want from an MP's web site?

"One of the things they could have is a sort of opinion polling, where they ask for your impressions. Lots of sites have a "Poll of the Day - give us your thoughts on this". That would be good because then you would know that they were listening to you in some kind of way."

Stern Survey, August 2001

This suggests that new channels of access which are easily accessible and publicly trusted are needed in order to provide a more level playing field for online democratic initiatives.

The second public concern goes to the heart of the debate about more interactive representation. It is all very well to say that people can e-mail their MPs or debate policy issues online, but what would be the point of doing this if politicians were either disconnected from the interactive technologies needed to communicate in this way or opposed to the greater voice this would give to their constituents?

In short, interactivity is not in essence a technological issue, it is about the culture of democracy, and specifically the relationship between representatives and the represented. A supermarket which offered an online ordering service would soon go broke if it rarely responded to online requests or failed to deliver its customers' orders or only responded to certain customers. MPs are not providing a commercial service and citizens are not customers, but nonetheless the public will only use e-democratic resources if they result in tangible benefits - such as greater access to MPs or influence on the policy process.

Some additional polling, conducted by yougov.com in July 2001, with a sample group of 4,782, casts further light on public attitudes to online interactivity:

- 27% of the sample group claimed to have participated in a web-based forum
- 13% of the sample group claimed to have participated in a political newsgroup
- 10% of the sample group claimed to have participated in a political chat room.

Of those who had participated in these online discussions:

- 64% agreed with the statement that 'online discussions are usually dominated by the same few people'.
- 48% agreed that 'online discussions rarely lead to any useful conclusions'.
- Nonetheless, 76% thought that 'online discussions can help to inform people about different points of view from their own'.

When asked which of the following were most important when participating in online political discussions, respondents were clear about their priorities:

- If everyone could have a fair say .................. 27%
- If they fed into the policy-making process .. 17%
- If politicians participated in them ............ 16%
- If there were clear rules of debate ............. 14%
- If they were well moderated .................. 11%

The pattern of the MORI research is reflected in the yougov findings: firstly, the public is concerned about fairness and ensuring that everyone has a chance to join the debate, the digital divide being a key issue; secondly, they want opportunities to be politically proactive by engaging with politicians on their own terms.
3 Recommendations
In an age when the public can shop, bank, plan travel, read the news and correspond with any part of the world online, the opportunity to interact electronically with their elected representatives should not be regarded as an added extra or a gimmick. 21st century democracy requires a more interactive relationship between representatives and represented.

Four recommendations are set out below, based upon what the public appears to want and what seem to be realistic targets. Other contributors to this report will have their own recommendations to make and their own comments on the ones below. We offer these proposals for public discussion rather than as a manifesto.

E-mail access to all MPs
The public deserves the opportunity to contact their MPs by e-mail and receive a reply by e-mail. MPs’ e-mail addresses should be publicised and the public should be encouraged to use this new form of communication. Some MPs have worried that this might result in communication overload, but this should not be a reason to avoid it – there are ways of filtering incoming e-mails and time needs to be allocated to deal with this form of correspondence.

Trial online surgeries
The Hansard Society is planning a series of pilot online surgeries, to see how well these work for constituents with matters to raise with their MPs. There is no substitute for face-to-face communication, but online surgeries might offer other benefits, such as greater convenience, a less intimidating atmosphere and a greater opportunity to follow up initial meetings.

Public spaces for discussion
The public needs to be brought into the policy-making and scrutiny process, with opportunities to share their experiences and expertise with legislators. There is a wealth of public knowledge and wisdom that MPs could draw upon in their deliberations and the internet provides a medium for connecting this to the parliamentary process. Parliament needs to continue its experimentation with online consultation and should consider seeking online public evidence in response to all or most select committee inquiries, draft Bills and standing committees.

Build digital bridges
The digital divide is manifestly a feature of poverty. Inventive ways of providing access and user skills for those who are currently digitally excluded are needed. Government initiatives – such as UK Online and the Wired-Up Communities – should be encouraged. Digital TV offers a major opportunity to link people to the internet, but digital broadcasters must start producing content of civic value to users and must be stopped from setting up walled gardens which only allow their subscribers to access commercially-valuable parts of the internet. Local internet kiosks and internet-connected payphones (of which BT currently has 700) could provide new opportunities for citizens to contact their representatives.

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His web site is www.hansardsociety.org.uk

What do you want from an MP’s web site?

“What he supports, the things he’s going to change for us, those sort of things. I mean, everybody’s private life is their own so I’d rather know what he was going to do for the country more than anything else”

Street Survey, August 2001
Don't be side-tracked by e-panaceas

Graham Allen MP

Don't be side-tracked by e-panaceas

Graham Allen MP

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Let’s just hold on a minute. Yes, we must use all the new technologies to connect with each other – not least MPs to electors. However, we do ourselves no favours by overbidding about the current impact and penetration of these techniques. Let’s start from a truthful rather than an enthusiastic position then we will know a little better what we need to do to realise the potential for everyone.

Dr Stephen Coleman has done more to involve people in politics by the use of new technologies than any other individual in the UK. I know therefore that he won’t mind me over-simplifying some of his findings just to be argumentative – not least since this is likely to be read by the converted.

Firstly, we should be careful not to characterise digital gadgetry with fundamental and historic breakthroughs like printing and the invention of radio and TV. Digitisation itself has tremendous possibilities, but it is often to do more of the same – faster, bigger and in different ways but, nonetheless, more of the same. It is the use to which we put these quantifiable larger possibilities which is the key thing.

At the moment, we are all desperately confined by the producer-led nature of all this (we’ve got this great-gizmo now its up to you to find a useful purpose for it). We are also unlucky in that all this exciting development is happening at a time when the ethics of public service and civil society are only just beginning to recover from the era of the ‘MacMarket’ politics of Thatcher and Reagan. This means we are not swamped with bright ideas on how everyone can benefit, nor are the ethics of our rulers open to those ideas yet. The view seems to be that the market will judge what is profitable and, if it doesn’t, well at least no one in public office can be blamed if it goes wrong.

What do you want from an MP’s web site?

"Not just facts and something you have to read and read because it gets tiring – but something that will catch your attention"

Street Survey, August 2001
We need to rebuild the confidence of Government to back its judgement and negotiate packages (in partnership with the private sector) that have a social pay-off. Experiments in wiring up poorer communities and developing services for them could show the way. Incidentally, these things are far more cost effective than current delivery systems since timely services use far fewer resources than universal or ill-fitting provision.

It is incumbent on all of us in leadership in politics to have the vision to say where Government and the public sector can have an impact. Just as the BBC created high standards and benchmarked quality TV which had tremendous educational and cultural values, so we should be open-minded enough now to look for its IT equivalent.

Given the size of the public sector— including most of our health and education needs, childcare, training, employment, TV and car licensing, national and local tax forms—it is remarkable that we don’t have an interactive Government/public channel yet accessible through our TV zapper. If a private company had a 40% share of GDP, it is inconceivable that they wouldn’t have a large slab of services delivered in this way.

Before I ignore my own warning and get too carried away, let us re-examine some of the data we have been presented with:

- I am always a little suspicious of the ‘number of connections’ sort of statistics— they may be connected but are they users?
- When people were offered an online advice surgery were they also offered a face-to-face surgery?
- Does one deeply frustrating experience which leaves the customer reaching to cancel a service count as ‘a hit’?
- Equally, if we had a sensible pricing policy for local calls and for internet use how significant would the text messaging statistics remain?

Why would you visit an MP’s web site?

“You want to be able to look at things like your MP’s voting record and you want to be able to write to your MP or e-mail your MP.”

Street Survey, August 2001

I suspect there is a lot of a barely used kit out there, not least if, as I heard at a seminar recently, the highest boredom migration from the net is among 16-21 year-olds— been there, done that, what’s next to play with? Yes, it is like riding a bike and people can return and use the skill later but that may be long after the penny farthing has be superseded.

One area where, even with the current state of the technology, there is great potential is in the drafting of law. The parliamentary process is a farce. The Executive— the Government of the day— puts a draft piece of legislation to Parliament which then rubber stamps it. In 14 years in the House I have rarely seen a single Bill changed by the parliamentary process.

However, recent events surrounding the election of departmental select committees indicate that the parliamentary corpse may be twitching. A burst of digital energy could turn the twitch into more measured movement. Rather than tolerate occasional spots of consultation, Government might allow (or be forced by Parliament) as standard practice for every Bill to be debated openly before the committee stage with the proceedings live on the web with an instant mediation service to receive and synthesise helpful comments so they can be incorporated into the committee’s thinking and perhaps into the Bill itself. All this needs is the political acquiescence of the Executive and it could be done technically and procedurally tomorrow.

A difficult one is MP’s e-mail addresses. Giving information on web sites is one thing,
entering into dialogue is another. I know your e-mail is the most important one sent today but sadly so are the other 50 or 100. If you are part of a campaign to swamp a particular MP with e-mails then, however worthy the cause, you deserve at best a standard reply. Also, what gives you the right to take the latest editorial line from the _Spen_, the _Guardian_ or your favourite chat show host or shock jock, half digest it, spew it down a pipe at the nearest total stranger - the MP will do - then get shirty when you don't receive a reply? You've got to be on the receiving end of some of this stuff to believe it!

At the very least, if MPs are to respond adequately to the many sensible and well-reasoned e-mails that are received, we need adequate staffing to do them justice. Equally, if advice surgeries are to go online, the access question must be seriously addressed if they are not to be elitist and self-selecting.

One of my concerns as a friend of IT is that the e-panacea can ensure that people do not get involved in the other vital areas of political reform. The biggest problem in UK politics is the incredible power of the Executive. It is conceivable that this problem could be made worse by IT. If communication becomes Government-to-consumer and bypasses all our feeble representative institutions, then we can become atomised and it is made that much harder for any organisation - Parliament, political parties, etc - which cannot access monopoly communications to have a say or develop thinking space, rather than that authorised by the Executive.

**Why would you visit an MP's web site?**

"You can get at them easier through the internet I should think than you can through a telephone call because they're always out, they're blanketed, people shield them"

*Street Survey, August 2001*

These bigger reforms and issues must come with the territory for all those interested in IT. It is of little use complaining MPs don't listen to us, when these MPs themselves are little more than a once-every-four-year electoral college to legitimise near-Presidental power. Then they have a residual role to promote or oppose Government but this should not be confused with serious power and influence.

In the process of reconnection, IT will be vital - but it is only one of the means by which the reconnection of elector to elected and the elected to power must be achieved.

_Graham Allen is Labour MP for Nottingham North_

_His web site is www.grahamallen.labour.co.uk_
E-politics is part of a total package

Sir George Young MP

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Between general elections, democracy depends largely on us.

Information technology can and should assist us in both of these areas of pressure on an MP's time, but such research as there is - as exemplified by Stephen's report - is being done on the former. (Recent investigation by my staff suggests that, across the wide spread of the European Union's current research programme into information systems and technologies, there is not a single project focused on the use of technology by parliamentarians, either in their parliamentary work or in their interaction with constituents.)

There is a temptation for MPs to spend more and more time developing the effectiveness of their constituency role - and there is nothing Government would like better. The more time we spend updating our web sites and replying to constituents' e-mails, the less time we have to make a nuisance of ourselves at the House.

So I want the web and the internet to enable...
me to provide a better service to my constituents, and Stephen sheds some light on how this might be done. But I also want it to help me with my job in the House, on which there may be scope for another piece of e-politics research — ‘What the MP wants’ — to complement ‘What the public wants’.

Let me make another general point. An MP has clear geographical boundaries — the constituency — and we observe a ‘no poaching’ convention. We don’t take up the case of a colleague’s constituent. We forward to the MP of whatever party any letter that his or her constituent writes to us. But the web knows no such boundaries. In a typical month visitors to my web site come from more than 20 different countries (yes, that’s countries not counties). If we are to go down the interactive path that Stephen proposes, then either the convention goes: or we need some better way of finding out who is on the keyboard at the other end of the chatline and of making sure that we are all accessible in this way.

It is deeply dispiriting for someone who has approached an MP through the web — on an issue which they believe to be very important — to be told that the dialogue cannot progress because of the convention, and then for that person to discover that his or her MP is not accessible online. It is not the best initiation to UK democracy.

Dispensing with the convention would be a two-edged response: those MPs who became most accessible and made best use of the technology would increase their visibility and influence with the electorate as a whole — but they would also carry an undue proportion of casework compared with MPs who stayed off the net. The right response is for more MPs to be accessible in this way.

Turning to Stephen’s interesting research — where I find his analysis optimistic is when he looks at the demand for particular services that an MP might provide, adds them up and concludes that 85% want some sort of interactive service. I drew a different conclusion — whatever the individual service that was considered, at least 61% did not want it!

Against this, I feel it is important to separate out the responses from those who do and those who don’t have internet access. Among the internet users, for example, 47% want their MP to offer e-mail contact, compared with only 23% of those who don’t have access. I think it’s reasonable to assume that those with access are better informed about the use and value of e-mail. Scaling this to constituency level suggests that already, in a typical constituency, nearly 20% of our constituents would like us to offer them an e-mail address and would be able to use it to connect with us. It seems clear to me that those who don’t offer at least e-mail contact will increasingly be regarded as inaccessible by their more progressive constituents.

What struck me about Stephen’s piece is the assertion that there is a demand for interactivity: ‘It is clear from the preferences expressed that the public... is more enthusiastic for interactive opportunities’. In the context, this appears to mean some kind of interaction via the web other than (or as well as) e-mail. I have a web site on which there is a facility to ask a question and get an answer. Although the site is well used, and although I get plenty of e-mails from constituents, I have not had one question through this web site feature since the general election. Moreover, some requests for ‘interactivity’ are difficult to respond to — am I alone in finding that many of the country’s students appear to believe it is the role of MPs to write their dissertations for them!

Why would you visit an MP’s web site?

“Frankly, I think once they’ve got your vote I don’t think they care about you after that, I really don’t”

Source: Sunday, August 2001
Why would you visit an MP’s web site?

“Normal people like myself don’t really know what’s going on, whereas if they made themselves more accessible through the internet as in questions, one-on-one chats, a little bit about themselves, stuff like that – maybe that would help.”

[Street Survey, August 2007]

Again, one needs to put this research into a broader context. People may want to access their MP on the web; but might they not also want easier access to conventional surgeries? Or to be able to phone and get straight through to their MP? The questions were posed in the rather narrow context about a specific means of communication. If you asked people: ‘Would you rather meet your MP face-to-face for 10 minutes over a cup of coffee; or have a chat with him on the web?’, even enthusiastic internet users might prefer the former. But the research did not explore how constituents regard the internet in relation to conventional methods.

This is not to dismiss the conclusions. It is to suggest that Stephen may be slightly ahead of the game. We have to look carefully at not just how constituents want to communicate, but also at how well-equipped they are to do so – in terms of their skills and habits as well as whether or not they have internet access.

If we take the MORI findings at face value, we might be rather excited at the idea that 39% of constituents think an online surgery would be useful to them. Indeed, some of us might be a little apprehensive. 39% of my constituents means more than 30,000 people. I do like to hear from my constituents, but surgery-style consultation with this number would be challenging!

However, I don’t see much chance of this or anything like it. First, because in normal times, most people have little desire to engage in serious dialogue with their MP. They come to us when they have a personal problem they think we can address, or when there is a local cause they can address to stir their passions.

Second, because there is a big difference between having access to the net and becoming an active user of things like online discussion. Recent data from the ONS and from OFTEL confirm the MORI finding that around 40% of all households now have internet access; but the ONS also studied how people actually use the net. Fewer than one fifth of those with access use chat rooms and other forms of discussion and much of this use is casual chit-chat rather than serious debate.

Perhaps we would gain more insight by asking: ‘If you needed to contact your MP where would you look to find out how to do so?’ My guess is that a high proportion of internet users would start by searching the web, and would be disappointed if they found that their MP had no web site – although more and more now have one. It would also be useful to ask: ‘If you wanted to contact your MP, which method would you prefer: web site/e-mail/phone/fax/letter/faceto-face meeting?’ Again, I suspect that many internet users might well prefer to start with e-mail, but that this could lead in many cases to a face-to-face contact.

Stephen’s idea of online surgeries is interesting and I think some colleagues already do something on these lines. It would be good to know how much response they get. But it is not clear whether Stephen has in mind a live online session – perhaps complemented by a web camera – or an iterative process taking place by e-mail with question
and answer, problem and options, perhaps taking place over a number of days. The latter approach is probably more convenient for most MPs and for most constituents, except perhaps for those who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing.

The most important sentence in Stephen’s report, paradoxically, has nothing to do with the net at all: ‘Whole sections of the population are currently turned off by parliamentary politics’. 65% of all the survey respondents agreed that ‘politicians will not listen to what the public says’. Stephen goes on to say that many of those who are most turned off are most online. But the survey actually suggests that people who have internet access may be less sceptical about getting their views across to politicians. Only 23% of those with access strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 30% of those without access. Certainly in my case e-mail has increased the scope for dialogue with constituents; it has also improved the quality and depth of dialogue that I and a constituent can have, given the constraints on our time. E-mail is so much quicker and easier than the processes of letter writing.

So the lesson for MPs is not just to modify our presence on the net – but to modify our presence on all media and in the House. Which leads me to my conclusion. The net should complement and reinforce other means of communication; it should not seek to displace or replace them. Our writing paper and all other literature should give details of our web site and our e-mail address. Our web site should give details of our advice bureaux and other ways of meeting us and communicating with us. E-politics is part of a total package, and Stephen has given us some ideas how to make it a more effective component.

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What do you want from an MP’s web site?

“Colourful logos, colourful lettering, probably easy access to get to and useful information”

Street Survey, August 2001
The use of new communication technologies such as the internet in politics is a matter worthy of serious attention as politics is all about communication. It is therefore surprising that politicians so far seem to be lagging behind many areas of life in adopting new technology.

The lack of progress to date has generated a lot of negative comment that has been reported in the media. And anyone looking at what most MPs – myself included – currently have to offer on the internet would have to agree that little progress has been made. But it is important to go beyond the easy conclusion of ‘aren’t our MPs useless and behind the times?’ if we are to improve the situation.

It is also important to recognise that there are two sides to the debate about the use of new technology by politicians. The first is the use of the internet by the individual politician. The second is the use by political institutions. While there is a degree of overlap, a mistake that is perhaps being made at present is to not sufficiently distinguish the two.

What do you want from an MP’s web site?

“Questioning, you know – a chat room where you can ask MPs something live. And online voting”

The tradition in this country has been one of MPs doing everything for themselves – from the recruitment of their staff to carrying out guided tours of the Houses of Parliament. This has been extended into new technology with MPs responsible for setting up their own computer systems and internet services such as web sites.

This creates a situation in which MPs operate as 659 small businesses, all struggling to manage their own resources and adopting a multiplicity of solutions. In this environment, it is no wonder that many feel threatened by anything that they perceive as increasing their workload. The advantages brought by new technologies will
eventually persuade the majority to adopt them but these forces are likely to operate slowly and at a very uneven pace. There are some signs that this is changing with the political parties and Parliament now offering far more support to individual MPs.

However, there are limitations to the advantages to the citizen that are likely to ever be brought about through the adoption of new technologies by individual politicians such as MPs. The primary interest of an individual political actor is his or her own self-promotion. This is not something to be shocked at but a natural extension of what they have always done. They publish paper-based material, take part in consultation exercises and work with the traditional media to advance themselves. They are small businesses engaged in an advertising venture to stay in business in a competitive market place.

The major advances from the citizen's point of view should rather be looked for in advances made by the institutions engaged in the political process. These consist of a wide range of bodies from the political parties, through pressure groups to the legislative bodies and Government at various levels.

Much of the attention has focused on the area of the delivery of Government services online and this was not surprisingly the top priority of respondents to the Hansard Society/MORI poll. If properly implemented, this could make all our lives easier and reduce the costs of Government administration - but it will not have such a direct impact on the political process as some of the potential new developments such as online consultation.

It is here that we may see fundamental changes in the nature of politics as far more people can become involved on a more regular basis. The survey showed support for participation in politics via the internet but also a high degree of cynicism about the way in which this may be conducted.

Why would you visit an MP's web site?

“If it’s just plain boring, just text and everything, I’ll move on to the next one”

Source: Survey, August 2001

This is where the evolution of the political institutions is especially critical. An MP running his or her own online consultation on a political issue may be of some use. It will be especially useful to the MP who can identify constituents interested in the subject to help their campaigning. Of far more value to the citizen will be a consultation that actually ties in to the deliberative and legislative processes.

Government at all levels has already started adopting this to a degree. Consultations on policy now commonly include publication of documents on a web site - but little use has been made of interactivity to date. Political parties have engaged in more interactivity but this often suffers from the same limitations as that carried out by individual politicians. It is about gathering support for already agreed policies rather than engaging in genuine open debate. Pressure groups will similarly use technology to enlist supporters and mobilise them to campaign on political issues.

The best opportunities for genuine involvement in the decision-making process will come from the bodies that actually make the decisions opening themselves up using new technology. This is where development has perhaps been most limited to date, yet it is the one which may really engage people.

The development of the accessibility of Hansard - the record of proceedings of Parliament - is an example of the potential of even the most straightforward internet technology. Not long ago, it was only accessible to those who had the time and resources to go to main libraries to which
bound copies were delivered some time after the debates. People would then have to be able to use indexing systems to work through the copies looking for the relevant information.

Now, it is available to a much wider audience from early on the day following the debate and powerful search tools can be used to simply retrieve information. Access is still not universal and those who have no home internet access may need to visit a library or other internet access point, but it is still far more widely available than ever before.

If *Hansard* is an example of better information *after* the event, the *Hansard* Society have provided us with examples of better participation *before* the event with their recent pilots for online consultation. These have shown how MPs in all-party groups and select committees can engage with citizens in the deliberative process. New technology could be incorporated into many aspects of the parliamentary process to broaden and deepen the information that MPs and ministers need to make good decisions.

With the right sort of strategy and investment it need not be either a mere public relations exercise or a flood of uncontrolled and useless information, but a truly democratic and participatory development. And this applies to Government at all levels - not just the Westminster Parliament. Indeed, many of the ideas are likely to come from local government and the devolved bodies. The question now is whether politicians are bold enough to accept them.

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**What do you want from an MP’s web site?**

"How about a chat section? I’m sure that’s really useful"  
*Sheet Survey, August 2003*
To serve democracy – how the internet can be used to strengthen representation

Andrew Pinder, e-Envoy

Approximately 400 million people around the world are online. By 2005, it is estimated that there will be more than one billion. This explosion will bring with it high expectations but also great potential – to develop societies in new ways, to foster economic growth and to revitalise democracy. As the e-Envoy I have three core objectives:

- To make the UK the best environment in the world for e-commerce by 2002.
- To ensure that everyone who wants it has access to the internet by 2005.
- To make all Government services available electronically by 2005.

Part of this commitment is to work out – in close co-operation with all stakeholders – how new technologies should be exploited in the process of revitalising democracy. In contributing to this report about what the public wants from e-politics, I would like to take the opportunity to talk about my vision of what the internet could do for our e-democracy and the way I would like to see it taken forward.

E-democracy in action

Using new technologies to engage citizens in the democratic process is already happening. Local government is using new technologies to give young people in foster care a greater say in their lives. The Welsh Assembly is consulting on their ICT strategy online. My office has developed Citizenspace as part of ukonline.gov.uk as an example of e-democracy in practice – providing formal online consultations about government policy and also a set of discussion forums from which we are learning some good lessons.

It is not only happening in the UK. European commissioners have multi-lingual chats with European citizens. The Commission has recently published a white paper aiming to open up the policy-making process, getting more people involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. Estonia is due to have electronic voting in its general election in 2003. I could mention many, many more examples. It is happening and at an accelerating rate. This is a positive trend, one that should be supported and enhanced. But it also implies big challenges for
governments and representative bodies all over the world – ensuring all people can take advantage of new channels for democratic expression and showing people that their voices will be heard and considered.

The role of the internet in traditional democracies
Why is it important to use the internet to foster democracy? There are worrying signs that participation and trust in traditional democratic forums are declining. The turnout in the last UK general election was the lowest since universal suffrage. Is this because people have stopped caring? Apparently not: there still seem to be deep concerns among people about the direction of our future society – indicated by increased involvement in single-issue organisations.

But, somewhere along the way, traditional democratic institutions have lost some of their ability to engage people. For a democracy to be vital, these institutions – I am talking about parliament, government, local authorities, political parties and politicians – must renew ways to communicate and engage with people.

The internet, now a feature of everyday life, could surely be used in this process. I am not saying that the internet is the only way to address the democratic deficit – but, used in the right way, it could serve as one of many means to re-engage citizens in the deliberative process through which we collectively shape, decide and realise our common future.

This could take many forms. One important part will be to use the internet to facilitate people’s participation in the government’s policy process. In using the internet to connect citizens to government, it is vital to ensure that it is also used to strengthen the roles of parliament and other representative institutions.

Hansard Society/MORI poll
Given this broad statement of why I see e-democracy as important, I would like to provide my comments on three important issues that the Hansard Society’s polling result highlights.

- Firstly, the result that 65% of the respondents think it undemocratic to move towards e-politics without everyone having internet access.

What should we make of this? We might simply accept this as a vote of no confidence, and give up. Or we could focus on arguing the case, aiming to change people’s opinions before we launch new initiatives. Or we can accept the validity of these concerns and take measures to close the digital divide while at the same time explore the potential of the internet for democratic reform.

Surely the last path must be the right one! The Government has already made the commitment that, by 2005, everyone who wants to should have access to the internet. Not only physical access, but the motivation, skills and confidence to be able to reap the benefits of the internet. High ambitions – but I do think they will be met by the comprehensive package of measures that is being implemented. In particular, 6000 UK online centres will be set up providing community-based access to internet by the end of 2002.

So, steps are being taken towards creating a digitally literate society where everyone – regardless of age, gender, occupation or income – can benefit from the opportunities that the internet provides. However, we should not sit and wait for everyone to have access before we can start doing things. As we work towards achieving universal access, we should start learning to use the internet as a complementary channel for democratic participation.

It is important to use the internet because, as I see it, it has the potential of broadening participation in the democratic process – attracting people who today may feel excluded and would not consider using traditional democratic channels.

One such group is young people – the ones
least likely to vote in elections but at the same time the most computer literate in society and the ones perhaps most likely to use the internet for democratic purposes. The Electoral Commission’s evaluation of the 2001 general election shows that 43% of 18-24 year-olds think that internet voting would encourage them to vote. But, the internet could not only help by engaging young people – the Hansard Society’s online consultation with women survivors of domestic violence shows that the internet could have advantages over traditional media when it comes to privacy and security.

- The second thing I would like to comment on is the polling result showing that 65% of respondents agree with the statement that politicians will not listen to what the public says.

I think this result highlights a very important issue. However, I do think that if we were to ask people the following question instead: *If we want to move democracy to a position in which politicians listen more to what the public says, could the use of electronic communication then contribute?* they may well have given a more optimistic answer.

However, I agree with Stephen Coleman that this issue is going to the very heart of the debate about more interactive representatives. There has to be a relationship between citizens’ engagement and the outcome. People will only use the internet for democratic interaction if it is effective – if it provides better access to decision-makers and if it means their voices are more clearly heard.

It is important that people feel their views are being listened to, understood and considered even if their interests are not always met. Democratic decision-making is a complex matter – balancing different interests – and that is why it has to be the continuing role of elected representatives to consider issues in the round and come to a decision based on all the evidence and made in the best interests of the country. To this end, we must ensure that elected representatives are able to use new technologies to listen to and understand those they represent – but without removing from them the responsibility for decision-making.

- Finally I would like to comment on the results revealing what the public want from their MPs.

I want to start with stressing the importance of having a clear understanding of the independent role of parliament from government. How the internet should be used in the process of parliament is mainly a question for parliament and not for government.

However, I believe that the internet provides new ways for constituents to interact with their representatives, for citizens to follow proceedings in the elected chambers, for representatives to communicate and deal with government departments and for groups of citizens to contribute to the scrutiny process.

The Hansard Society’s polling results indicate that people are interested in being offered opportunities to interact with their MPs via the internet. For example, online surgeries and e-mails are seen as the two most important services for MPs to provide.

Looking ahead of us, I think we are at the start of an exciting decade. We will most likely see a dramatic rise in internet penetration and a continuation of innovative uses of the internet as a tool for democratic activities. I also hope that the UK, as one of the oldest democracies, can show global leadership in developing 21st century democracy by the use of new technologies.

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National Forum on Internet and Democracy

The Hansard Society has established a new national forum bringing together leading proponents in the field of digital technologies and democratic politics.

The Hansard Society's long-standing and influential e-democracy programme has piloted inclusive ways of involving citizens in the parliamentary and democratic process via internet and other digital technologies. As e-democracy moves higher up the political agenda, the creation of a National Forum on Internet and Democracy will broaden and build on this work. Andrew Pinder, c-Envoy, is Patron of the Forum.

Membership of the forum will be drawn from Government, MPs across the political spectrum, members of the devolved assemblies, parliamentary officials, local authorities, the BBC, Channel 4 and the digital broadcasters. The forum will meet quarterly, with the following objectives:

- To promote ways of using the internet and other digital technologies for democratic purposes.
- To discuss policy issues relating to the political and social use of the internet.
- To evaluate experimentation and research in the areas of e-politics and e-democracy and to establish best practices.
- To enable Government, Parliament and other key players to collaborate, where appropriate, in the provision of digital connections between citizens and governance.

The first meeting will take place in October 2001.

If you would like any information about the National Forum on Internet and Democracy, contact edemocracy@lse.ac.uk
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and the Harms Project. The Society, as an independent non-profit organisation, is neither for nor against any position. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.