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Parliamentary web presence: a comparative review

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Abstract: Parliamentary web presence is seen as a tool designed to buttress a range of key parliamentary functions operating within an overarching democratic framework. Many governments have embarked upon ambitious e-government programmes in the hope of increasing participation. However, there is now a growing realisation that e-government strategies have not achieved the hoped-for success and there is an increasing body of research concerned with analysing these problems. This paper seeks to add to this body of research and draws upon insights provided by usability studies developed to provide an analysis of various parliament websites. It also compares how parliaments of several countries use ICT to increase transparency and to facilitate participation of citizens. As such it is the first of its kind to undertake work of this nature. The paper concludes by arguing for a usability framework for analysing the effectiveness of e-parliaments. This could be used by e-government web designers and architects alike to identify weaknesses, within a specific area, of both the form and content of their parliament and other e-government websites.

Keywords: e-Government, e-democracy, open democracy, parliamentary web presence, transparency, e-participation

1. Introduction

Parliamentary web presence is seen as a tool designed to buttress a range of key parliamentary functions operating within an overarching democratic framework. Often the notion of e-parliament encompasses virtual institutions that have regional, continental and, in the case of e-parl.net¹,

¹ <http://www.e-parl.net/eparliament/welcome.do>

global as well as national dimensions (Dandjinou 2002). Many governments have embarked upon ambitious e-government programmes in the hope of increasing efficiency and consequently widen participation. In the UK, for example, over £3 billion was spent on e-government between 2000 and 2005 (Socitm, 2005). The motivation behind parliamentary web presence should be to enhance democratic public participation, although it has been argued that in the UK, the motivating drive to use new technologies has been economic rather than political: Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can save money for access to, and delivery of, government services and information (Coleman 1999).

There is now a growing realisation that e-government strategies have not achieved the hoped-for success and there is an increasing body of research concerned with analysing these problems (Baptista 2005; Saxena 2005). This paper seeks to add to this body of research and draws upon insights provided by usability studies developed to provide an analysis of various e-parliament websites (Nielsen 2000; Esteves and Garot 2006). The purpose of this research is to compare how parliaments of several countries use ICT to increase transparency and to facilitate participation of citizens. As such it is the first of its kind to undertake work of this nature, since previous studies focused on one country only and how its respective parliament makes use of the Internet technology (Karhula and Grönlund 2002; Mustajärvi 2002). The use of other technologies such as TV and radio broadcasting, as well as detailed discussion of how parliaments conduct their work, fall outside the scope of this paper.

2. Structure

After making some preliminary remarks covering issues associated with e-participation, government organisation and research methodology, the paper opens by referring to the notion of e-government readiness. It then explores issues associated with transparency and goes on to examine e-government and citizen participation. Finally, the paper will outline avenues for future research in this area, concluding by recommending a usability framework for identifying weaknesses in e-government websites.

3. Background

There are widespread concerns about what has been termed the 'democratic deficit', and low voter turn-out for elections and referenda have been cited as illustrations of this problem. The low turn-outs at the recent local council elections in the United Kingdom and the referendum on increased autonomy for Catalonia in Spain are specific examples of this process. A decline in traditional civic participation, documented by scholars such as Putman (2000), could have its counterpart in the rise of participatory technologies such as the Internet, theorized Coleman (1999) and others. It was thought that by developing interactivity between governments and

citizens via the new medium of the Internet, better participation of citizens in the democratic process could be achieved. Initially, e-democracy was the main focus for most governments in improving their relationship with citizens, relying on the growing demand for better accessibility and transparency of public administration. Ulrich (2004) proposes a model for the design and execution of e-democracy initiatives, which rests upon three pillars: e-consultation, e-participation and e-voting. Together, these three elements may enable the citizenry to execute their democratic rights, by allowing them to express their opinions and concerns about politics, and to take an active part in the design of new policies. This model is in line with OECD guidelines (OECD 2001) and orientations which also define three main components: information, participation, and consultation. Through frequent and extensive inclusion of the public's voice, governments can improve democratic outcomes and promote a better reputation of their institutions. The result is a more transparent and accountable government. Online consultation and the feedback mechanism are the two main instruments used to incorporate the opinions and experiences of citizens, consumers and businesses in the policy-and decision making processes- in order to improve the democratic and political outcomes.

Citizen participation via ICT is thus one of the basic attributes of first-rate governments and at the same time has become a trend throughout all administrations that have a consistent vision of the future. It can become a fundamental instrument in the activities of countries, states, and municipalities. The question here is how committed governments are to these ideals.

E-citizenship is something that in many cases will give a major level of complexity to citizen participation. It covers a broad spectrum; however an effective working definition is 'an environment where citizens, administrations and stakeholders share information in order to actively participate in the decision, actions and functions of government through the Internet and new technologies'. According to a glossary of terms on the e-Democracy National Project website in the UK, e-citizenship is "the overarching term referring to online participation in society and participation in an online society" (E-Democracy National Project 2006).

As is to be expected, parliaments differ in how they conduct their affairs. Most parliaments operate a chamber system supported by the use of committees and sub-committees and the extent to which they embrace openness is influenced by specific local traditions and political cultures. Parliaments create sub-committees in addition to the parliamentary committees. Sub-committees are to committees what committees are to the House; the parent body is relieved of a portion of its workload by delegating some part of its mandate or a particular task to a smaller group. Proceedings in sub-committees are of an informal, collegial nature (Marleau and Montpetit 2000). Yet the work performed by sub-committees plays a crucial role in the parliamentary decision making process as the sub-committee can focus on a limited mandate and thus be more effective and productive. Some parliaments use open hearings, others do not. The arguments for *in camera* meetings range from subject-based reasons (i.e. discussion of national security issues)

to administrative-based reasons (i.e. discussion of future business or the drafting process of reports).

4. Methodology

Despite the variations in parliamentary administration, it has been possible to construct a range of criteria that can be used to undertake a 'compare and contrast' analysis. Apart from the specific parliamentary configuration, there will always be a discussion on what services should be provided by the parliament and what should be left to the political parties. A typical example here would be what role, if any, the parliament should play in providing individual web pages for elected representatives, or if this should be the responsibility of the political parties or individual representatives. This study does not differentiate between providing links to web pages on internal or external servers, nor public or commercial providers. The primary concern is whether pages where representatives are able to put their own content are easily available to the electorate. However an assumption has been made that access to such facilities should be free of charge.

The paper follows a tightly focused usability study centred on transparency and participation for developing an analysis of e-parliament websites from a range of countries. The countries that were examined are Canada (CA), Cyprus (CY), Denmark (DK), Greece (GR), Ireland (IE), Norway (NO), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE) and United Kingdom (GB). Given the limited resources available for this research it has not been possible to undertake a comprehensive survey of the selected websites, so the specific nature of the usability study flows from a focus on transparency and the extent to which governments use ICT to facilitate a two-way dialogue with their citizens. The purpose of this study is to identify the commonalities across the sites as well as to differentiate between various degrees of e-parliamentary activity. The research was undertaken by academic researchers from a number of universities across Europe and a parliamentarian in Canada.

Comparative surveys of e-government readiness and use have been performed by a multitude of researchers and organisations (Ojo *et al* 2005). The UN e-government readiness reviews for the period 2003-2005 (UN 2003; UN 2004; UN 2005) show that the adoption of information technology and broadband networks is increasing. Table 1 shows that almost all countries studied in this paper have increased their e-government readiness index:

Table 1: E-government Readiness Index

	UNPAN 2003	UNPAN 2004	UNPAN 2005
Canada	0.806 (6)	0.8369 (7)	0.8425 (8)
Cyprus	0.474 (51)	0.5189 (49)	0.5872 (37)
Denmark	0.820 (4)	0.9047 (2)	0.9058 (2)
Greece	0.540 (37)	0.5581 (36)	0.5921 (35)
Ireland	0.697 (17)	0.7058 (19)	0.7251 (20)
Norway	0.778 (7)	0.8178 (10)	0.8228 (10)
Portugal	0.646 (26)	0.5953 (31)	0.6084 (30)
Spain	0.602 (29)	0.5844 (34)	0.5847 (39)
Sweden	0.840 (2)	0.8741 (4)	0.8983 (3)
United Kingdom	0.814 (5)	0.8852 (3)	0.8777 (4)

Source: (UN 2003; UN 2004; UN 2005)

However it should be noted that according to the UN, e-government readiness is determined by website assessment, telecommunication infrastructure and human resource endowment, and not by transparency or by ease of participation of citizens.

The UN readiness reviews also seek to measure how well governments use ICT for participation. However, according to the UN, the “*E-Participation Index* assesses the quality and usefulness of information and services provided by a country for the purpose of engaging its citizens in public policy making through the use of e-government programs” (UN 2005). The UN report makes the point that it was concerned with Government-to-Citizen (G2C) rather than Government-to-Citizen-to-Government (G2C2G) relations; essentially a one-way flow of information was examined. Yet even within this narrow definition of e-participation, the UN found that there are significant variations between countries, as can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2: E-participation Index

	UNPAN 2003	UNPAN 2004	UNPAN 2005
Canada	0.828 (3)	0.9016 (3)	0.8730 (4)
Cyprus	0.017 (36)	0.0656 (33)	0.0794 (39)
Denmark	0.448 (14)	0.7377 (7)	0.7619 (6)
Greece	0.086 (32)	0.1148 (30)	0.1587 (34)
Ireland	0.586 (10)	0.2295 (24)	0.1905 (32)
Norway	0.345 (18)	0.3607 (17)	0.3968 (19)
Portugal	0.448 (14)	0.2131 (25)	0.2063 (31)
Spain	0.155 (28)	0.0328 (35)	0.0794 (39)
Sweden	0.586 (10)	0.5738 (13)	0.5714 (11)
United Kingdom	1.000 (1)	1.0000 (1)	1.0000 (1)

Source: (UN 2003; UN 2004; 2005)

In addition, as is often the case in the commercial applications of ICT, without an appropriate cultural and organisational environment, being technically ready is not enough to ensure the efficient use of the technology.

5. Findings

5.1 Transparency Dimension

The paper will now look at how well parliaments are using ICT to improve transparency, starting from the premise that all parliamentary proceedings as well as all relevant documentation should be open to the public, since parliaments are elected by popular vote and should be accountable to their respective peoples. All countries in our study have open plenary meetings, however not all sub-committee meetings are open and reasons given for closed meetings range from questions associated with national security to making sub-committees more efficient.

As has been mentioned above, sub-committees play a crucial role in the parliamentary decision making process by initiating and scrutinizing legislation and it could be argued that closed meetings undermine transparency. There are two key transparency aspects related to such meetings: online access to real-time debates and easy access to an effective document management system designed to make appropriate documentation readily available. These aspects have been covered in this research. Document transparency includes the possibility of examining parliamentary documents used as background for political decisions, along with records of incoming and outgoing mail.

Meeting transparency should allow the possibility of following real-time proceedings of meetings of political bodies on the Internet as well as provide access to an online webcast archive. A detailed calendar of past, present and future meetings along with agendas and archive transcripts should also be readily available.

To answer the question of whether governments provide for these different kinds of transparency, the investigation employed a slightly modified version of a framework for transparency to evaluate how well different parliaments perform (Berntzen 2006). The framework analyses transparency from the dimensions outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Transparency Framework

Document transparency	The possibility of examining parliamentary documents used as background for political decisions.
Benchmarking transparency	Does the Parliament publish comparative statistics, so citizens can compare the country to other countries or how well a country fulfils international agreements?
Meeting transparency	The possibility of following the proceedings of meetings of political bodies on the Net. Meetings should be announced beforehand, including a detailed agenda.
Decision maker transparency	What are parliamentary leaders and members doing throughout the day, meetings with lobbyists etc?
Disclosure transparency	Asking questions to ascertain what is not in documents and meeting agendas.

We base this analysis on a framework for participation (Esteves and Garot 2006) which in its turn is based on the OECD model (OECD 2001) for public participation. Table 4 below outlines the results of the first part of the research. The evidence presented indicates that logging and publishing emails for public access is not a feature on any of the sites reviewed. The reason may be that emails to representatives are considered personal and may be subject to privacy laws, but this assumption would need to be verified by further research. Some parliaments publish the list of proposals received from government and individual representatives in the plenary meeting before assigning the proposition to the respective sub-committee.

Table 4: Transparency Dimension

	NO	SE	DK	GB	IE	ES	PT	CA	GR	CY
Records of incoming and outgoing mail	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Meeting agendas on Internet	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Case documents	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Detailed transcripts	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Webcasts of meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Archive of webcasts	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Agendas of representatives	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Almost all parliaments publish detailed agendas on their websites and most publish supporting documentation, with some providing advanced search engines and cross-referenced catalogues to facilitate the process of finding all relevant documents related to an issue. The Danish Parliament has an electronic form-based service for ordering paper copies of documents.

Direct webcasts of plenary meetings are now provided by several countries, but archives of webcasts are less common. The Swedish Parliament provides a free archive of webcasts going back to the year 2000. In contrast, the UK Parliament provides access to an archive of webcasts limited to 28 days after the meeting; after 28 days copies can be ordered on a DVD at £11.75 per 30 minutes. The Canadian House of Commons provides access to two Parliamentary sessions (up to a maximum of ten years) of the televised Chamber and committee proceedings. Individuals may order, free of charge, copies of these proceedings, providing that the individual supplies the tape required for the duplication.

The Swedish Parliament provides individual voting records for each representative and contains a significant degree of material describing the functions of parliament, its representatives, election procedures, and so forth. This seems to be typical of most government websites. However, transparency is much weaker when providing information on individual representatives with individual agendas, calendars, voting records, travel plans, and expenses not being easily accessible and having to be culled from a number of sources, including external agencies such as newspaper websites. One exception to this is the Danish Parliament website which also maintains a separate page listing all official travels including budgets.

Most Parliaments have well developed, if flawed, mechanisms for transparency. Detailed transcripts of plenary meetings are made available online within limited time, and most background documents are available on the Internet. Webcasting is used by an increasing number of parliaments and it should be mentioned that several countries provide dedicated television and/or radio broadcasts of parliamentary meetings. However, a significant amount of other information is not available through parliament websites.

5.2 E-participation Dimension

The paper will now look at how well governments have embraced ICT to facilitate citizen participation in parliamentary decision making. In this context, citizen participation is taken to mean the ability to intervene in debate and to influence the decision making taking place in the parliament, by introducing arguments and facts before a decision is made. The research did not look at issues concerned with direct democracy or e-voting, since all nations subscribe to the representative democracy model (Held 1996). As Table 5 below indicates, ICT offers a wide range of options for parliaments and elected representatives to engage in a productive dialogue with their electorates.

Table 5: Overview of e-citizenship Internet tools

	Forums	Surveys	Public hearing	Blogs	Chats	E-mail
Consultation		X	X			
Participation	X			X	X	X

Source: Esteves and Garot (2006)

The research looked at how much use parliaments make of these technologies and as Table 6 indicates, they have not seriously engaged with the possibilities available.

Table 6: Participation Dimension

	NO	SE	DK	GB	IE	ES	PT	CA	GR	CY
Does the parliament provide an e-mail address for questions?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does the parliament provide e-mail directory of representatives?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Does the parliament have an open discussion forum?	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Does parliament provide discussions forums for individual representatives?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Does parliament provide blogs for individual representatives?	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Does parliament use e-consultations? (public hearings)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Does parliament use e-petitions?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

The evidence collected indicates that almost all parliaments provide an e-mail address for questions to the parliamentary office. It is also common to provide e-mail addresses of individual representatives and/or parliamentary party groups.

The Danish Parliament updates a Frequently Asked Questions page based on questions received by the parliamentary information office and the Swedish Parliament provides individual pages for each representative with an e-mail address and a link to web pages maintained by the political party. The Canadian House of Commons provides individual pages for each representative with

an e-mail address, contact information (telephone numbers, etc.), and links to web pages maintained by the individual representative. However, as Table 6 shows, little use is made of other ICT options. Most Parliaments are still not using the full range of available Internet technologies as participatory tools in order to involve citizens. Discussion forums, e-consultations, blogs and e-petitions are tools that could be used to enhance democracy by involving citizens more in the decision making processes (Stephens *et al* 2006; Macintosh *et al* 2005) but it appears that much work is still to be done in this area. An exception is Portugal, for example, which has an open discussion forum structured around four main topics: school materials, rights and obligations of parents associations, education law discussion, and traffic security. Portugal also provides a blog structure where representatives can create their own blogs.

6. Discussion

As will be noticed, the findings of this research do not support those of the UN with respect to e-participation. For example, according to the UN, the United Kingdom has a high index related to readiness for e-participation, yet this research shows that the UK still has a significant way to go before it employs ICT to its full effect. This view is supported by a report by the Hansard Society, titled "Members only? - Parliament in the Public Eye", which recommends a radical overhaul of the UK Parliament's online presence so that the site is at least easier to navigate, more interactive and more consultative. The new site must appeal to "the widest range of citizens", and should be well promoted so that the public is aware that there is a way they can access their parliament (Sherriff 2005).

There have been, and continue to be, significant initiatives in this area. The Scottish Parliament has used e-petitions for some years and since the formal launch of the Scottish Parliament's e-petition service, 50 e-petitions have been posted online, attracting over 21,000 signatures and around 700 discussion comments (IDABC 2005).

The Canadian Special Committee on the Modernization and Improvement of the Procedures of the House of Commons presented its Fourth Report to the House of Commons on June 12, 2003 and recommended the development of a system for electronic petitions, in consultation with the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (Kilger 2003). The Report stated:

One of the great successes of the new Scottish Parliament, in the view of many, is its petitions system. Members of the Committee who visited Edinburgh were impressed with how this operates.....One interesting innovation, however, is the development of a system for petitions to be signed and filed electronically. This mechanism ties in with recent discussions about e-democracy and e-consultation by parliamentary committees, and, in particular, the initiative of the Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities of the Standing Committee on Human

Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities in this Parliament.

Following the success of the Scottish experiment, the Bundestag (the Lower House of the German Parliament) launched an electronic petition service² in September 2005 enabling citizens to voice their concerns and submit petitions online.

The findings of this research indicate that while parliamentary transparency with regard to ICT might be in a reasonably healthy state, the same cannot be said of e-participation. There is clearly a mismatch between what the technology can deliver and the extent to which it is being used. It is also apparent that further work needs to be undertaken in three key areas. This study should be extended to embrace a wider selection of countries and regions to validate and confirm the findings outlined in this paper. The tools used here appear to be robust enough to provide a range of critical and valuable insights, and could be used with confidence in further work.

The second area of research could be focused on the end-user experience of parliamentary websites. This could be undertaken by academics based in various countries working within an appropriate usability framework. The evidence cited above from the Hansard Society in the UK implies that such work is of an urgent nature. The third area of research should focus on a review of official reports covering the issues such as e-parliament and e-democracy to reveal if there is a tendency for such publications to overstate developments in these areas or if the measures used are inadequate for the task.

ICT is providing a wide range of tools that people use everyday at home and in work, and some e-democracy research has included trial experiments with technologies to consult citizens on regular basis. The Canadian House of Commons has had two experiences with committees using internet technologies to provide citizens with the opportunity to participate in the parliamentary decision making process. On October 21, 2005, The Foreign Affairs and International Trade Standing Committee launched an online consultation survey³. As part of its review of the Government's International Policy Statement and the Status of Persons with Disabilities Sub-Committee launched the first on-line consultation⁴ on December 2, 2002 as part of their review of the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program (CPP). The on-line consultation consisted of a poll allowing participants to provide their viewpoints on major issues, provide their stories and experiences to the sub-committee with the option of posting them on the website, and propose solutions to the challenges identified by the CPP Program.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

² http://www.bundestag.de/htdocs_e/index.html

³ http://cmte.parl.gc.ca/cmte/CommitteeHome.aspx?Lang=1&PARLSES=381&JNT=0&SELID=e17_&COM=8979

⁴ http://www.parl.gc.ca/cppd/index_e.asp?Language=E

Parliaments should engage with their Internet-literate populations to move beyond traditional notions of parliamentary participation. E-consultations can be used by parliament and committees/sub-committees to ask citizens for input on specific issues. Blogs can be used by individual representatives to start discussions on issues of their concern. Netmeetings can be used for real time communication. Surveys and opinion polls can be used to collect information and opinions in a structured way. However, this study has found little evidence of parliaments using information technology to actively pursue a two-way dialogue with their citizens using ICT. It is possible to argue that the involvement of citizens in political decision making is the responsibility of the political parties. Still, in practice we see that some parliaments have implemented mechanisms of citizen involvement by having open hearings in the parliament to involve interest groups, enterprises, organizations and so forth. If this is the ambition of parliaments, ICT offers the possibility of moving way beyond the traditional channels of communication. The parliaments of the countries studied above provide for a high degree of transparency, but are generally not good at using the possibilities of information technology to increase participation.

Our results indicate that although ICT can provide a range of options for e-participation, it can be argued that these options of themselves will not overcome the democratic deficit mentioned at the start of the paper: that the malaise affecting the body politic arises from deep-rooted problems that cannot be resolved by technical means. This may well be the case, but it is important that researchers in this field constantly test the rhetoric contained in reports issued by government and non-government agencies about the extent to which e-citizenship is developing with the reality on the ground. From the evidence presented here it appears that even if parliaments have implemented democratic mechanisms, like open hearings, to facilitate input to policy decision making, they have been quite reluctant to use information technology to strengthen and extend e-participation. The research also indicates that while reports from bodies such as the UN are extremely valuable in charting developments in the use of ICT in this sphere, they should be treated with a degree of caution since they present a partial view of the whole picture. As is revealed in this paper, it is often a case of 'the emperor's new clothes'.

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