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RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CITIZENS IN THE USE OF THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES: THE CASES OF THE INTERNET WEB SITE AND SATELLITE TELEVISION AT THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES

1. Introduction.

In the information and communication relationship between the Chamber of Deputies and the citizens wide use is made of high-tech ICT tools, such as the web site and the televised broadcasting of Chamber of Deputies.

These tools were developed to balance the need for information in support of the Chamber and of the deputies within the framework of an adequate preliminary legislative scrutiny with forms of 'open communication', that is, forms that are designed to allow the Chamber's information system to be accessed for the purpose of consultation also by the individual citizen.

The instruments used are characterized by the highly dynamic nature of the product offered, which is subject to constant change. The web site, for instance, was extensively innovated in November 2003 after 5 year of activity in its previous version. Further innovations are planned to be introduced by the end of this year in order to boost its usability. Likewise, satellite television has undergone a process of innovation that has extended the number of hours of broadcast available as well as the range of programmes offered.

2. The use of ICT in the relationship between Parliament and citizens.

2.1 The web site.

The Chamber of Deputies' institutional communications have increased enormously thanks to the Internet site (www.camera.it).

Since 1996 the site - which is also in English, French, German, Spanish and

Arabic, and with versions in a format that is accessible to the disabled - has been structured as an information tool covering the whole area of the institutional work of the Chamber.

The new version of the site, set up in November 2003, aims at simplifying access and at enhancing usability, catering in particular for users without much familiarity with parliamentary activities.

The recent new version of the site has paid particular attention to the sorting, ordering and classification of the materials on the site, in order to make it increasingly easier to access and retrieve the vast amount of documents and information available online, and to facilitate access to it. The Internet site is an online permanent digital archive in the full sense of the term, updated in real time, on which data is also available on previous Parliaments. The aim is not only to cater for "specialist" users (businesses, universities, schools, etc.) but also non-specialists.

It therefore contains seven thematic sections (Deputies, Parliamentary Organs, Documents, Rules, Europe/Foreign, Administration, Citizens' Services), each of which is broken down into items and sub-items that can be consulted immediately. The documentary part is very full, and all the current parliamentary proceedings dating back to 1996 are computerised: all the parliamentary proceedings are organised in specific databanks (bills, amendments, order papers, policy and scrutiny documents, House and Committee proceedings, reports submitted to Parliament by the Government and other constitutional bodies, etc.) which are always available and are updated in real time. Electoral data, the archives of regional legislation, Constitutional Laws and all other Statutes dating back to 1996 are also available, together with the catalogues of the books in the Chamber of Deputies Library. Through the site, access is also available to a number of leading legal databanks, information databanks and press agencies.

One outstanding feature is the promptness with which the site is updated. The reports of debates on the floor of the House, for example, are provisionally posted on the site almost in real time, as the deliberations proceed (every section of a parliamentary session is made available on the site about one hour afterwards); the final proceedings and most of the documents are posted at 9:00 a.m. the following day, when the proceedings are classified in the archives in printed format. All the documents discussed and voted on in the House and in the Committees are also posted.

The information section is also very wide-ranging. It is managed by the Chamber of Deputies' Press Office, and there is also a newsletter service with at least one publication daily, summarising all the main events on the floor of the House and in Committee, as well as events and ceremonies at the Chamber of Deputies.

The following are also available: comprehensive information on the work of each Deputy, with specific pages illustrating the individual work performed by each Deputy (Bills tabled, speeches, personal biographical data, etc.); information on the finances of the Chamber, with the publication in full of its annual financial statements, and all the information relating to the legal and economic position of each of the Deputies; information on inter-institutional and inter-parliamentary relations both at

the European and the international level (for example all the proceedings and texts of the work of the European Convention are available in the special section entitled Forum per l'Europa (Forum for Europe); multimedia pages or materials (video, digital versions of texts, etc.) are available on events for the general public, such as ceremonies, conferences, conventions, exhibitions and miscellaneous events. The site also publishes invitations to tender, notices of competitive entrance examinations, the main internal rules and regulations, and documents detailing the administrative structure of the Chamber.

Annual site hits totalled 3,427,977 in 2001, 3,811,775 in 2002, 4,562,139 in 2003 and 3,234,934 in 2004 (up to September), with a predicted annual average of over 4,900,000. The site has over 400 thousand pages. The number of pages visited grew from 49,326,532 in 2003 to 51,892,415 in 2004 (only up to September).

2.2 Satellite television.

The use of satellite television to broadcast Chamber sittings and initiatives is particularly significant.

Ever since the last Parliament, the Chamber has transmitted free satellite broadcasts of the Assembly's sittings.

On the 26 November 2003, in its resolution no. 158, the Chamber Bureau approved the gradual expansion of the 2000 programming. In addition to live broadcasts of the Chamber sittings, some extra 100 hours of programmes were transmitted up to 14 July 2004:

❖ Parliamentary Committee hearings. In particular, the broadcasts focus on hearings conducted as part of the fact-finding surveys of the combined Finance, Productive Activities and Agriculture Committees of the Chamber and Senate on the Parmalat case and the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies on constitutional reform;

❖ ceremonies and conferences promoted by the Chamber Speakers office;

❖ events of an institutional nature held on Chamber premises, such as the presentation to Parliament of reports by the various Authorities;

❖ events organized by the Chamber of Deputies Foundation (exhibitions, lectures, etc.);

❖ a popularizing documentary series on European institutions produced in collaboration with RAI-Sat and broadcast on the occasion of the elections of 12 and 13 June.

The Chamber of Deputies' satellite television channels continued its broadcasts also during the Parliamentary vacation: repeat broadcasts of the more significant sittings of the Parliamentary Committees, as well as several events and shows held at the Chamber during the first six months in 2004, for about 3 hours a day, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., repeated afternoons from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

As far as the programme of activities is concerned, a graphics project is under

way to redesign the screen presentation, using information boards broadcast during pauses in the programme containing various kinds of information (programmes scheduled, calendar of work, announcements, etc.). This project can be implemented gradually with the preparation of further information boards and the creation of transitions and 3D animation.

Further enhancements will involve the techniques for filming events as well as the gradual extension of the programming to include also a publishing project with the production of popularizing documentaries on the subject of the Chamber of Deputies and dedicated to different aspects of the parliamentary institution.

3. Future Prospects for developing the use of new technologies.

The possibility of using the new technologies in parliamentary activities must be explored in different directions: IT cooperation among European parliaments for the purpose of developing interparliamentary relations and European Union enlargement itself; implementation of the relationship between Parliament and the citizenry using new IT tools.

The further development of inter-parliamentary relations, which have developed enormously in recent years, can also be fostered by adopting networking systems between Parliaments.

There are many constituencies in which this type of co-operation already exists with networks that have been instituted or are developing at the present time. These include the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) network, to which the Scientific and Technology Assessment Committees of different national Parliaments belong (for the Chamber of Deputies the Office of the Presidency VAST Committee); the development of closer co-operation on documentation between European Parliaments within the framework of the ECPRD (European Parliamentary Research and Documentation Centre).

Also included in this area are ongoing IPEX project initiatives aimed at allowing information to be compared concerning the European Union and relations with national parliament on the web site of each Parliament in the 25 member countries of the European Union.

The development of the relationship between Parliament and the citizenry will take account of several e-democracy experiences. Many forms of on-line participation exist today in Italy, both at the level of public administrations and of local authorities. The adoption of these experiences at parliamentary level must be properly assessed with reference to the further development of the web site.

Forms of communication may be envisaged that are aimed at linking the citizenry and the Institution in more innovative ways than in the past: the simple dissemination of information originating from the Chamber among the citizens, as is currently done through the web site and the numerous information and documentation initiatives could be extended to include forms of two-way communication that also allow the citizens to transmit to the Chamber their observations, opinions and proposals, using set query formats already tested on other institutional web sites.

Possible e-democracy tools include forums, internet-based consultation, etc. aimed at acquiring opinions and suggestions, and at assessing the degree of public involvement in Parliamentary activities.

The use of e-democracy tools presents several delicate aspects as their use must certainly not be allowed to express itself in forms liable to jeopardize or even detract from the exercise of parliamentary rights, involving forms of direct access of popular opinion to a system based on parliamentary representation. The problem is thus to find a correct balance between parliamentary rights and the possibility of enhancing and streamlining communications between the citizenry and Parliamentary when using the new technologies.