



MPs ONLINE

CONNECTING WITH CONSTITUENTS

A study into how MPs use digital media to communicate with their constituents

Andy Williamson

FINAL DRAFT

Microsoft[®]



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FOREWORD

As I searched for more chairs to accommodate the influx of attendees to the events that Microsoft was hosting at this year's party conferences, I noticed that something was different. It used to be that technology policy events were attended by a select few but it seems that times are changing. What this confirmed to me was that there is much broader interest by those active in politics in the opportunities offered by the use of technology. This research tells precisely the same story. Almost all MPs are using technology to help communicate with their constituents and many are interested in doing more.

As you would expect, for many MPs the technology they are predominately using is email with almost as high a number of MPs having their own website. There is a notable drop when it comes to the use of the more interactive technologies like social networking, blogging or instant messaging. However, what this seems to show is that MPs' use of technology to communicate with constituents is pretty similar to how the rest of us use technology to communicate. We all use email and increasingly many of us, but by no means all, are using more interactive applications.

As these more interactive technologies are used by more and more people, I believe that it is essential politicians continue to mirror how the rest of us use technology. I am sure that there will be growing interest amongst politicians in using interactive technologies to offer new ways to communicate with constituents. To my mind, applications like Instant Messaging (IM) offer the chance for a far more personal engagement with voters. Interestingly, the survey shows that this is the least used form of communications by MPs but it is one of the most popular with younger people. Microsoft Live Messenger alone now has 17.5 million users in the UK. Obviously, the proliferation of webcams can transform a textual relationship to a face to face one.

It is clear that the use of technology by MPs and those in politics is crucial to continue to engage with the ever growing proportion of people who now choose the internet as their first port of call for news, views and interactive communication with others. The traditional forms of media are no longer as ubiquitous as they once were. We no longer all sit and watch a nightly news bulletin. Information sources have multiplied, diversified and reaction is expected to be instantaneous.

In the very near future, I believe that a wide and varied use of different technologies, offering a number of flexible, interactive ways for voters to engage with MPs and learn about politics, will play a vital part in keeping politics relevant to a population who see the internet as a natural part of their professional and social lives.

Paul Morris

Head of Government Affairs, Microsoft UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Twenty-four hour news, the internet and mobile telecommunications shrink distance and change our expectations of immediacy, contact and intimacy. These same technological shifts offer MPs scope to improve business and information management but also to improve communication and information flows with constituents. Previous research has identified how the internet has been used by sitting MPs as both a communication tool and as a tool for political campaigning. However, the majority of the research available focuses on external analyses of digital media resources and only limited research exists on MPs' attitudes to digital media and their perceptions of its use and value. This report describes the findings of a survey of 168 MPs and of a subsequent focus group of MPs and parliamentary staff.

The findings confirm that the internet is now a part of the day-to-day life of the vast majority of MPs. Email adoption has reached saturation point and the use of websites is commonplace. MPs see digital media as positively supporting their communication with constituents, particularly email and websites, but also the ability to upload rich media, including photographs and video. This adoption pattern continues, albeit at lower levels, for newer digital tools and particularly for Web2.0 technologies, such as social networking. This suggests the potential for greater engagement and closer ties in the future; even if at present social networking remains predominantly a tool to keep constituents informed. The findings suggest that primary motivations for adoption relate to an MP's majority, length of incumbency and, to some degree, the nature of their constituency (and constituents). We conclude that adoption of the internet is largely down to personal attitudes to technology further affected by the surety or otherwise of the MP's seat in Parliament. On the downside, digital media is certainly no panacea and MPs report issues with office workload, a desire for more training and challenges in identifying whether those communicating with them are indeed constituents.

The report provides recommendations for MPs, constituents and for Parliament. Primary amongst these are that MPs need to develop a policy for the use of email and strategies for digital media that defines the target audience and connects with their offline strategy. Constituents benefit when MPs are online and so citizens are encouraged to promote the internet and provide examples of good practice to break down barriers amongst those MPs who are more resistant. In the digital age democracy can be driven by both sides. Finally, the report recommends a review of the licensing and re-use of content created by Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

New digital technologies have transformed business, government and society. Twenty-four hour news, the internet and mobile telecommunications shrink distance and change our expectations of immediacy, contact and intimacy. British society today is based on fast-serve, convenience and such pervasive cultural attitudes encroach on and affect the political sphere. It is well argued that the internet offers the potential for increased democratic engagement, potentially lowering the barriers to access and creating opportunities to reduce our democratic deficit (notwithstanding the challenge of a parallel digital deficit). Technological shifts offer MPs considerable scope to improve business and information management but of more interest in this instance is the potential to improve communication and information flows between MPs and their constituents. In parallel, there is a tangible shift in the balance of power as constituents, single-issue groups and other interested external parties are able to create new channels of engagement quickly and cheaply, providing considerable reach and demonstrably influencing public and political opinion.

Previous research has identified how the internet has been used by sitting MPs both as a communication tool and as a tool for political campaigning; however, the majority of the research available focuses on external analyses of digital media resources. There is only very limited research available on MPs' attitudes to digital media and their perceptions of its use and value. This report describes the findings of a survey of 168 MPs and of a subsequent focus group of MPs and parliamentary staff. The report consists of:

- a brief summary of the background and key literature informing the study;
- an annotated discussion on the use of online media amongst MPs;
- a write-up of the survey findings and discussion of those findings along with a thematic discussion of the focus group findings; and
- a summary of the key findings and recommendations for MPs (and their constituents) on the use of online media.

BACKGROUND

There are well-established historical trends that show how an emergent new media form has been able to disrupt and transform politics. Newspapers and radio are examples of this, as is television. Since the 1960s, television has dramatically transformed political commentary and the way that politicians communicate.¹ These media have now been joined by the new digital media that are enabled through the internet. These digital media are in turn starting to reshape our socio-cultural and political norms.² Television and radio remain the way most citizens in the developed world keep in touch with events at large. They, along with newspapers (particularly in the UK), bridge the space between the public (and public opinion) and government. However, today's highly corporatised media offers little more than 'an uneasy compromise between quality and popular news discourses – that represents the worst of both worlds'.³ Particularly noticeable around election time, the popular media focus is too often on simplistic polling, with each new poll a headline in its own right. In this context, political reporting is akin to 'the sports results, accompanied by spurious and often self serving theories from commentators'.⁴

Traditional media is subject to tight controls and high barriers to entry; in contrast the internet is relatively easy and inexpensive to harness. The internet challenges the lack of opportunity for citizen involvement, making publication and promotion of a diverse range of minority and alternative viewpoints relatively straightforward and low-cost.⁵ The internet has fragmented and decentralised the context in which communication occurs. So-called 'experts' must now compete with unedited egalitarian sources of information, 'blogs' being a pertinent example of emergent civic discourses,⁶ a point not lost on our politicians.⁷ This has led to a weakening in the power of traditional media to control information and shifted attention, 'allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time'.⁸ It is in this context that MPs are starting to harness the web to communicate with their constituents, themselves circumventing traditional media outlets.

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- 1 N.Postman (1986), *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* (NY: Penguin Books).
 - 2 S. Coleman & J. Spiller (2003), 'Exploring new media effects on representative democracy', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9(3), 1-16.
 - 3 J. Atkinson (2001), 'Tabloid democracy' in R. Miller (ed) *New Zealand government and politics* (Auckland, NZ: OUP), 3rd ed, pp. 305-319.
 - 4 N.Hager (2006), *The hollow men: A study in the politics of deception* (Nelson, NZ: Craig Potton), p. 262.
 - 5 J. Habermas (2006), *Ein avantgardistischer spürsinn für relevanz: Was den intellektuellen auszeichnet* (Wien, Austria: Renner Institut); A. Williamson (2007), 'Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICT', paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Network Conference (Nov 5-7), Prato, Italy.
 - 6 S. V. Kulikova & D. D. Perlmutter (2007), 'Blogging down the dictator? The Kyrgyz revolution and samizdat websites' in *The International Communication Gazette*, 69(1), 29-50; K. Ng (2007), 'Asymmetrical Warfare: Having a biff with the mainstream media' in *Aotearoa Ethnic Journal*, 2(1), 18-21
 - 7 N. Jackson (2006), 'Dipping their big toe into the blogosphere: The use of weblogs by the political parties in the 2005 general election', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58 (4), 292-303.
 - 8 J. Habermas (2006), *Ein avantgardistischer spürsinn für relevanz: Was den intellektuellen auszeichnet* (Wien, Austria: Renner Institut), p. 4.

Society now has higher expectations of service and communication than ever before and this is no different when it comes to their elected representatives. As Norton observes, this shift has occurred alongside greater electoral volatility and is paralleled by the advent of extensive and accessible ICT discussed above.⁹ The internet, Zittel argues, has created an opportunity to restructure communication between MPs and their constituents.¹⁰ This has led to both an increase in opportunity and, in some cases, motivation for MPs to communicate online.

It is not just the volume and immediacy of communication that is changed by the internet, new network technologies change the very nature of communication, conversation and engagement and this is clearly visible across the wider online world.¹¹ In a political context, ICTs are being used to 'facilitate change in the three major areas of the everyday work of legislators: as electorate representative; as party representative; and as national legislator'.¹² MPs are increasingly likely to communicate their views to constituents collectively (via email newsletters, a website or blogs) and individually (via email).¹³

Ward, Lusoli and Gibson argue that the decentralised nature of the internet theoretically challenges the dominance of the party-based model, providing opportunities for individual representatives to deviate from the party line.¹⁴ However, Norton's analysis shows this potential remains largely untapped.¹⁵ Whilst there is a definite and demonstrable shift towards what Zittel refers to as a 'representative' model of engagement, this is largely in terms of individual customisation of standard messages and branding. The party-centric paradigm, where the message of the party is of primary importance, remains dominant in the UK and

parties essentially see their web site [sic] as a centralist vertical communication tool.¹⁶

MPs' focus remains largely on promoting themselves through reportage of their efforts in the House or constituency and by linking to ideologically similar commentators or websites. This is hardly surprising since, as Witschge and Coleman observe, there is an inherent tendency amongst internet users in the political domain to seek out information that supports pre-held beliefs and to communicate with like-

9 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.

10 T. Zittel (2003), 'Political representation in the networked society: the Americanisation of European systems of responsible party government?' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9(3), 32-53.

11 M. Castells (2000), *The rise of the network society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers), 2nd ed; A. Williamson (2007), 'Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICT', paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Network Conference (Nov 5-7), Prato, Italy.

12 S. Ward, W. Lusoli & R. Gibson (2007), 'Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?' in *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 66(2), 210-222.

13 C. Leston-Bandeira (2007), 'Are ICTs Changing Parliamentary Activity in the Portuguese Parliament?' in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 403-421; P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369; T. Zittel (2003), 'Political representation in the networked society: the Americanisation of European systems of responsible party government?' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9(3), 32-53.

14 S. Ward, W. Lusoli & R. Gibson (2007), 'Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?' in *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 66(2), 210-222.

15 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.

16 N. Jackson (2006), 'Dipping their big toe into the blogosphere: The use of weblogs by the political parties in the 2005 general election', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58 (4), p. 258.

minded people.¹⁷ It is also unsurprising given the tribal nature of British politics, where MPs are almost exclusively elected within a party system, a finding borne out by the number of known 'rebel' MPs taking an independent stand online and an analysis of how Portuguese MPs use the web. Whilst Portuguese MPs report that the internet does improve direct communication with citizens, the party-based proportional voting system, where MPs are elected from a party list based on the overall share of votes, means there is less value (or increased personal risk) in individual MPs expressing an overtly independent point of view.¹⁸ As Jackson points out, the ease of online publishing can backfire on MPs and political hopefuls too, when a poorly thought through remark or controversial comment is picked up by the media.¹⁹ This is important since, as Norton and others describe, British MPs appear more motivated to use the internet as a tool for their own (and their parties') re-election, rather than as a tool for seeking views, true engagement or opinion forming:

[MPs use the internet] primarily for the purpose of disseminating material about themselves: what they are doing in Parliament and what they are doing for the constituency... It is, in essence, an aid for getting re-elected at the next General Election under the party's banner.²⁰

This pattern is mirrored in Australia.²¹ The foregoing leads to an assertion from some commentators that parliamentary funding for MPs' websites, particularly a £10,000 allowance that MPs voted for in 2007, disadvantages other candidates at election time.²²

The corporatised and asynchronous use of the internet by MPs is important to recognise since, as Coleman and Spiller point out, representative democracy is made up of three critical and inter-connected elements; the 'representatives, the represented and the system of representation that connects them'.²³ Mitigating this discourse slightly, it is worth noting that public reaction to MPs online is largely positive and is seen as bringing parliamentary democracy more in touch with civic life. Indeed responses to a survey evaluating the Hansard Society/House of Lords 'Lords of the Blog' project²⁴ clearly indicate that the public appreciate open and frank communication with politicians – and that this is even more highly valued when the dialogue is two-way.

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- 17 T. Witschge (2002), 'Online deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for deliberative democracy', paper presented at the Euricom Colloquium: Electronic Networks and Democratic Engagement, (9-12 October), Nijmegen, Netherlands; S. Coleman (2005), 'It's interactivity, stupid!' in S. Coleman & S. Ward (eds) *Spinning the web: Online campaigning in the 2005 general election* (London: Hansard Society), pp. 5-12.
- 18 C. Leston-Bandeira (2007), 'Are ICTs Changing Parliamentary Activity in the Portuguese Parliament?' in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 403-421.
- 19 N. Jackson (2006), 'Dipping their big toe into the blogosphere: The use of weblogs by the political parties in the 2005 general election', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58 (4), 292-303.
- 20 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), p. 365.
- 21 S. Ward, W. Lusoli & R. Gibson (2007), 'Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?' in *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 66(2), 210-222.
- 22 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.
- 23 S. Coleman & J. Spiller (2003), 'Exploring new media effects on representative democracy' in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9(3), p.4.
- 24 See: www.lordsoftheblog.net.

Contextualising the growth in online communication and the use of ICT, it is noted that parliamentary email accounts²⁵ increased from 4,838 in 2002 to 7,397 in 2006. By 2006, only 21 MPs did not have an identifiable email address listed on either Parliament’s website or in Dod’s Parliamentary Journal.²⁶ MPs appear to have embraced the web too, with 73 per cent having websites by early 2007, up from 65 per cent in 2004.²⁷ Norton notes that, in early 2007, 20 of those websites were either inactive or invalid and one had lain untouched for 18 months. Mirroring the trend seen in Australia²⁸, the websites of British MPs have also evolved from individually crafted efforts to more template-driven and standardised (often derived from a party template). This suggests both a maturity in the adoption of websites and an increasing recognition of the internet as ‘business as usual’ within the wider milieu of political communication. There is clear evidence of this maturity when tracking the use of the internet during parliamentary election campaigns since 2001.²⁹

Table 1 shows that there is a wide range of web-based media available to MPs. From the limitations of email and static websites, MPs are now able to utilise synchronous online spaces and engage with user-driven Web2.0³⁰ technologies.

Table 1: Dynamic nature of web-based media.

Party website	More passive
Personal website	
Email newsletter	↑
Web-based campaigning	
Web-based discussion forum	↓
Email (for correspondence)	
Texting to mobile phones	More participatory
Blog	
Social networking	
Instant messaging	

Having email or a website is one thing, using them effectively is quite another. There is little data to support any conclusions as to the overall impact of email and the internet on MPs and their communication with constituents. As Table 2 shows, political website WriteToThem.Com has been tracking responsiveness to emails via their website for three years; however, the data volumes per MP are small and the methodology unreliable.³¹

25 That is, email accounts on the ‘parliament.uk’ domain.

26 Of these, five were Sinn Fein MPs who have never taken up their seats in the House. P. Norton (2007), ‘Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT’ *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.

27 M. R. Vicente-Merino (2007), ‘Websites of Parliamentarians across Europe’ in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 441-457

28 S. Ward, W. Lusoli & R. Gibson (2007), ‘Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?’ in *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 66(2), 210-222.

29 G. Alstead (2002), ‘MPs: cyber-men or cyber-shy?’, *Aslib Proceedings*, 54(6), 385-392; N. Jackson (2007), ‘Political parties, the Internet and the 2005 General Election: third time lucky?’ in *Internet Research*, 17(3), 249-271; S. Ward & R. Gibson (2003), ‘On-line and on message? Candidate websites in the 2001 General Election’ in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5(2), 188-205; S. Ward & W. Lusoli (2005), ‘From weird to wired’: MPs, the internet and representative politics in the UK in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11(1), 57 – 81.

30 Web 2.0 is a term used to generically describe websites where the users can publish content such as pictures, comments or even documents.

31 The feedback survey asks senders whether a response to their email was received after two weeks (if no reply is received to that email, senders are asked again one week later). There is no quantification of the response categories provided, therefore ‘very high’ and ‘very low’ must be considered somewhat subjective.

Table 2: MPs' responsiveness (source: writetothem.com)

Year	Emails sent	Survey responses (n=)	MPs' responsiveness rating	
			Very high	Very low
2005	29,976	57,459	31%	4%
2006	62,033	40,232	23%	3%
2007	88,200	22,232	20%	2%

Missing from the discussion within key literature is the use of more interactive tools commonly referred to as Web2.0 and platforms such as social networking websites (such as Facebook and MySpace). However, it is clear from our own monitoring of political activity online that this is an important new frontier not only for some MPs but also (and perhaps more importantly) for political candidates.³²

Little substantive data exists on how the use of email and the internet affects the workload of MPs and their offices. As far back as 2002 the House of Commons Information Committee, suggested that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of correspondence was electronic and, unsurprisingly, informal communication with MPs suggests that this figure is now significantly higher. Jackson suggests that the decision to adopt online media, particularly more interactive or higher-activity media such as blogs, can be based on the availability of resources and, therefore, it can be expected to be more prevalent amongst the larger parties.³³

The internet has had a demonstrable impact on parliamentary communication. Most MPs are now communicating online and many have websites, some blogs and a handful maintain a presence on social networking sites.³⁴ Although the internet does clearly support MPs to become more independent, the primary paradigm remains rooted in the party model. The foregoing suggests that the internet is a tool to communicate outwards, self-promote for the purposes of re-election and to gauge opinion and it is not seen as a tool to aid representation or to enhance engagement: internet-based communication by MPs is largely about delivery and devoid of strategies for engagement.³⁵ However, research to date (and much of that discussed above) has tended to focus on either political campaigning online,³⁶ or on external assessments of MPs web and email presences³⁷ – in other words, on the public-facing

32 A. Williamson (2008), 'Facebook politics: Would the real Gordon Brown please stand up?' retrieved April 15, 2008, from hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/edemocracy/archive/2008/02/13/facebook-politics-would-the-real-gordon-brown-please-stand-up.aspx

33 N. Jackson (2006), 'Dipping their big toe into the blogosphere: The use of weblogs by the political parties in the 2005 general election', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58 (4), 292-303.

34 A. Williamson (2008), 'Facebook politics: Would the real Gordon Brown please stand up?' retrieved April 15, 2008, from hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/edemocracy/archive/2008/02/13/facebook-politics-would-the-real-gordon-brown-please-stand-up.aspx

35 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369; S. Ward & W. Lusoli (2005), 'From weird to wired': MPs, the internet and representative politics in the UK in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11(1), 57 - 81;

36 G. Alstead (2002), 'MPs: cyber-men or cyber-shy?', *Aslib Proceedings*, 54(6), 385-392; N. Jackson (2007), 'Political parties, the Internet and the 2005 General Election: third time lucky?' in *Internet Research*, 17(3), 249-271; S. Ward & R. Gibson (2003), 'On-line and on message? Candidate websites in the 2001 General Election' in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5(2), 188-205; S. Ward & W. Lusoli (2005), 'From weird to wired': MPs, the internet and representative politics in the UK in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11(1), 57 - 81.

37 G. Alstead (2002), 'MPs: cyber-men or cyber-shy?', *Aslib Proceedings*, 54(6), 385-392; D. Calenda & L. Mosca (2007), 'The political use of the internet: Some insights from two surveys of Italian students' in *Information, Communication and Society*, 10(1), 29-47; S. Coleman (2006), 'Parliamentary communication in an age of digital interactivity', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58(5), 371-388; L. Goodchild, C. Oppenheim & M. Cleeve (2007), 'MPs online: an evaluative study of MPs' use of web sites', *Aslib Proceedings*, 59(6), 565-587; N. Jackson (2004), 'Escaping from the straitjacket: UK MPs and their e-newsletters', *Aslib Proceedings*, 56(6), 335-343; N. Jackson (2006), 'Dipping their big toe into the blogosphere: The use of weblogs by the political parties in the 2005 general

aspects of MPs' internet use. A gap clearly exists in the body of knowledge for a broader analysis of how MPs themselves perceive the internet, their use of web-based media in the broadest sense and the impact that they perceive it to have on their communication with constituents.

election', *Aslib Proceedings*, 58 (4), 292-303; M. R. Vicente-Merino (2007), 'Websites of Parliamentarians across Europe' in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 441-457; S. Ward & W. Lusoli (2005), 'From weird to wired': MPs, the internet and representative politics in the UK in *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11(1), 57 - 81.

METHODOLOGY

The research used a mixed-methods approach in two consecutive phases of data collection. Firstly, a primarily quantitative survey of MPs was carried out and this was followed by a second qualitative focus group. To support the design of the survey questions, we undertook a review of current academic literature relating to the use of online media by elected representatives and a brief information-gathering exercise to solicit pertinent examples of such usage. This allowed us to tightly define the survey questions in order to achieve the maximum quantity and quality of data.

Survey design

The foregoing discussion of the literature highlighted a range of digital media that are either in established use or which appear to be emergent amongst MPs. Further, the review identified gaps in knowledge as to how new technologies are impacting on the working lives of MPs and their parliamentary offices and what the perceived values and barriers to more effective use of digital media might be. A survey instrument was developed in order to answer the following questions:³⁸

1. Which technologies do MPs use to communicate with constituents?
2. How long have they been using these technologies?
3. Of the technologies used, how are they rated in terms of their ability to support communication with constituents (and vice versa)?
4. What could improve the way that MPs use digital technologies?
5. How has the use of new technology affected the way MPs communicate with their constituents?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies for MPs?

Focus group design

The second stage of the research project was a focus group consisting of MPs and their office staff (office managers and researchers). Selection criteria for the focus group was based on factors derived from the survey and included:

- Urban versus rural;
- Close to London versus remote to London;
- Gender; and
- Parliamentary majority.

³⁸ See Appendix A for a copy of the survey form.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey questions were included in a survey administered by ComRes through their MP Panel between April 21 and May 9, 2008. The survey was completed by 168 MPs (26 per cent) using self-completion postal questionnaires. Data are weighted to reflect the exact composition of the House of Commons in terms of party representation and regional distribution. In the following text occasional quotes are embedded, these are taken from open-ended answers provided in response to the survey.

Adoption

ICT adoption patterns for MPs mirror those of the general public, with email the primary tool in use in their offices.³⁹ As Figure 1 shows, 92 per cent of MPs use email and 83 per cent have a personal website. These rates of adoption diminish rapidly for other media, with only 11 per cent of MPs blogging and 6 per cent having used instant messaging to communicate with constituents.

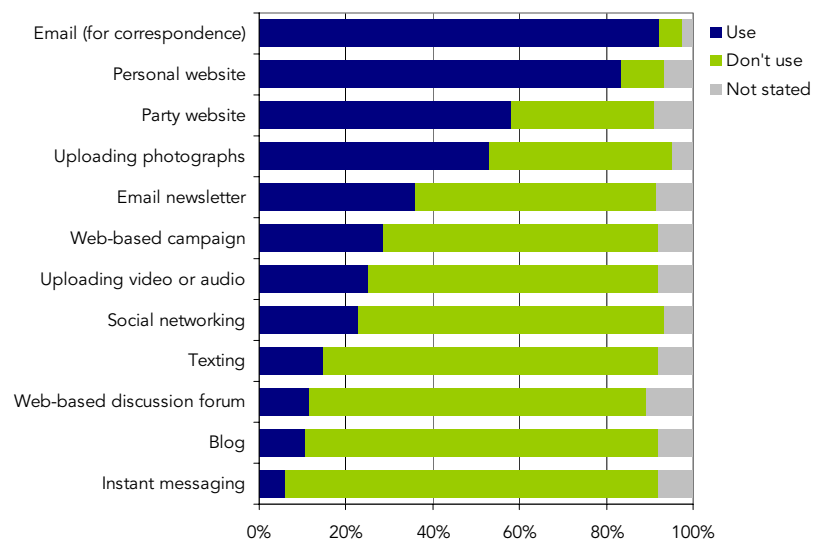


Figure 1: Adoption of different media

Two types of communication emerge as prevalent in this context. Firstly, one-to-one communication via email and, secondly, traditional 'publishing' of information to be consumed. The most widely used digital media are asynchronous and primarily passive in nature, such as websites. In summary, the more interactive or real-time the medium, the less likely that it will be used by MPs to communicate with their constituents.

³⁹ A. Williamson & J. Dekkers (2005), 'ICT as an enabler in the community and voluntary sector in New Zealand' in G. Irwin, W. Taylor, A. Bytheway & C. Strümpfer (eds), *Community Informatics Research Conference (CIRN) 2005* (Cape Town, South Africa: Community Informatics Research Network) pp. 408-429.

Rates of adoption for different digital media over the last three years vary quite dramatically see (Figure 2). The most notable increase has been in social networking, rising from only 3 per cent of MPs in 2005 to 23 per cent of MPs today. The year-on-year uptake in the use of social networking tools seems to be decreasing, suggesting that adoption is likely to settle around the one-third mark in the current Parliament.

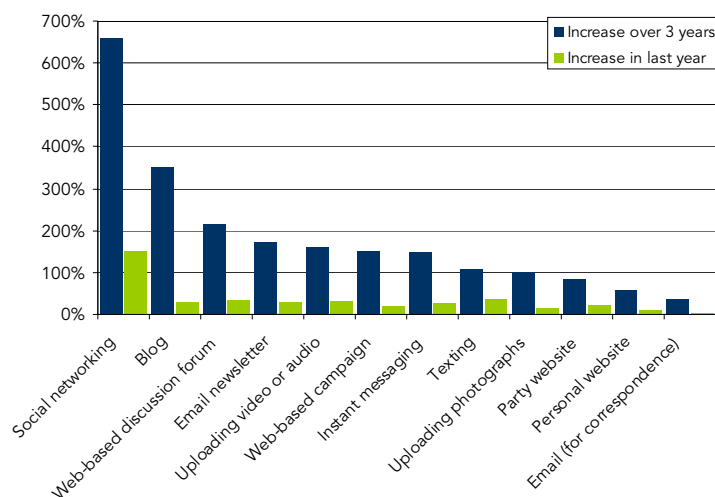


Figure 2: Rates of change in adoption patterns

Email

Email warrants particular attention as it has become a ubiquitous tool of choice for most MPs to communicate with their constituents. Sixty-seven per cent of MPs have used email for more than three years and only six per cent of MPs still do not use it. In terms of the current Parliament, email use would appear to have reached a point of saturation, with those who do not use email saying that they do not intend to adopt it in the future either:

It has both potential and risks and I am disinclined to get involved now as I retire at the end of this Parliament.

Analysis of ICT adoption following the 2005 general election suggests that the adoption pattern relates to long-standing MPs being less familiar and more averse to the technology while natural attrition and the induction of MPs who have become familiar with ICTs in their previous roles will positively affect adoption.⁴⁰

Overall, there is a clear perception amongst MPs that email is a valuable tool for keeping in touch with constituents. The immediacy of email is noted as a benefit but it is seen as a double-edged sword:

Email is a marvellous tool for communication, but a nightmare for MPs. Many constituents want to have a long email conversation with you. Sadly I have too busy a schedule.

In addition to feeling swamped and lacking the office staff and time to respond to emails, MPs suggest that it can create unrealistic expectations about response times

40 P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT' *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.

and that it is difficult to filter genuine email communication from spam and messages from non-constituents. There is also some awareness that, despite the benefits of email, over-reliance on it as a method of communication could lead to the exclusion of some constituents. It is, moreover, important that email is not seen as a complete replacement for traditional methods of communication:

Email [is] useful for urgent communications but need to remember that the worst off constituents getting the worst deal from society don't have access to electronic communications and rely on the post.

Further suggesting the general normalisation of email communication within MPs' offices, there is little difference in the adoption of email across parties or by region, nor does the age, gender or the marginality of an MP's constituency obviously affect whether or not email is used. There is slightly less use of email amongst MPs elected before 2001, 90 per cent are using it, compared with 98 per cent of those elected in or after 2001.

Social networking

Where the data suggests that email usage is now almost ubiquitous amongst MPs, it also shows that the use of newer, more emergent and interactive tools such as social networking are far from commonplace – less than one quarter of MPs (23 per cent) are using social networking tools, such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo. When the data on the adoption of such tools is analysed, there are clear differences across a number of dimensions. There is a notable difference in the use of social networking tools between political parties, with Liberal Democrat MPs being more than three times more likely to use social networking tools than Conservative MPs. As discussed later, there are factors other than party allegiance at play here, particularly relating to marginality and incumbency. There is also an interesting geographical adoption pattern emergent in the data, whereby 43 per cent of London MPs use social networking tools, substantially more than MPs from any other region. MPs from Wales and the Midlands are the least likely to use this media (80 per cent do not use them).

Age is a factor in the adoption of social networking, with only 18 per cent of MPs born between 1940 and 1960 using it. This is in contrast to the 38 per cent of MPs born after 1960 using social networking but slightly more than the 14 per cent born before 1940 who do so. Table 3 suggests that the marginality of a constituency has little affect on the use of social networking tools until the MP's majority exceeds 30 per cent, at which point there is a sharp decline in adoption.

Table 3: Adoption of social networking tools and marginality of constituency

	0.1-9.9%	10.0-19.9%	20.0-29.9%	30%+
Not stated	0%	8%	6%	16%
Use	23%	27%	25%	6%
Don't use	75%	65%	69%	77%

The length of time that an MP has been in Parliament is a clear predictor of their adoption of social networking. Of the MPs elected in or after 2005, 40 per cent are using social networking, which contrasts sharply with the 5 per cent of MPs elected in or before 1986 who use it, a finding that is only partially explained by age. Gender is

another factor, with women MPs more likely than men to use social networking (35 per cent and 20 per cent respectively).

Blogs

Of the MPs surveyed, only 11 per cent have a blog. This is perhaps surprising given the current attention blogging receives in both the print media and amongst internet users. As with social networking, blogging MPs are more likely to come from London (21 per cent of London MPs have a blog) but are least likely to represent a Scottish constituency (only 9 per cent). Age does not appear to be a major barrier to blogging, in fact MPs born before 1940 are more inclined to blog than their younger colleagues. MPs in marginal constituencies are no more likely to blog than others; however, those with a majority of more than 30 per cent of the electorate are substantially less likely to have a blog (3 per cent), as are MPs who have been in Parliament since before 1988 (3 per cent).

Predicting future adoption

As discussed earlier, digital media such as email and websites appear to have reached or be close to reaching their maximum levels of adoption amongst the current Parliament. Past experience suggests that significant increases in the level of adoption will now result from new MPs coming into Parliament as non-users retire or fail to get re-elected. The remaining digital media included in the survey show relatively low levels of usage and fall into two distinct categories. First, there are those media where there is an indication that adoption is likely to increase amongst the present group of MPs and, second, there are media that do not seem likely to be more widely adopted at all and which do not appear to be gaining traction amongst MPs.

In the former category – media that are likely to become more widely used – Figure 3 suggests that the use of email newsletters will increase. Fifteen per cent of MPs indicate they are likely to start using these in the next six months. Other growth areas include the uploading of video and audio to the internet (a further 12 per cent of MPs indicate that they will use these) and both texting to mobile phones and web-based discussion forums (both 9 per cent), albeit from a low base. The least used media, instant messaging, seems unlikely to become much more widely adopted, with only 4 per cent of MPs indicating that they will start to use it.

Interestingly, despite the relatively low numbers of existing users and current popularity across the internet in general, few MPs indicate that they will start blogging (11 per cent currently do and only 8 per cent indicate they will start blogging) or using social networking (23 per cent use and 5 per cent plan to use). Perhaps one reason for this resistance is that:

Social websites and blogs are too scatter-gun. They get your message to a lot of people who are not constituents.

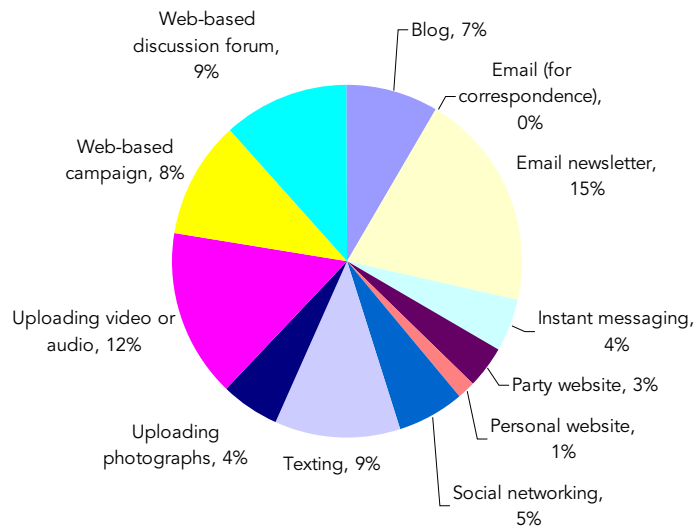


Figure 3: Percentage of MPs who plan to adopt media in the next six months

Valuing technology

MPs were asked to evaluate how useful the different digital media that they used were in communicating with their constituents. Unsurprisingly, email rates very highly with 87 per cent of respondents using email indicating that it was of positive value to them. However, the most highly valued media are personal websites, seen as positively contributing to communication with constituents by 89 per cent of users.

Figure 4 reveals that the media of least value to users are instant messaging (seen as positive by only 36 per cent of users and itself the least used media) and web-based discussion forums (53 per cent). The commentary above on adoption suggests a preference for less interactive media and the value placed on different media also suggests that this is the case. For example, blogging and social networking, which are both pro-active but asynchronous media are seen as positive by 62 per cent and 61 per cent of users respectively.

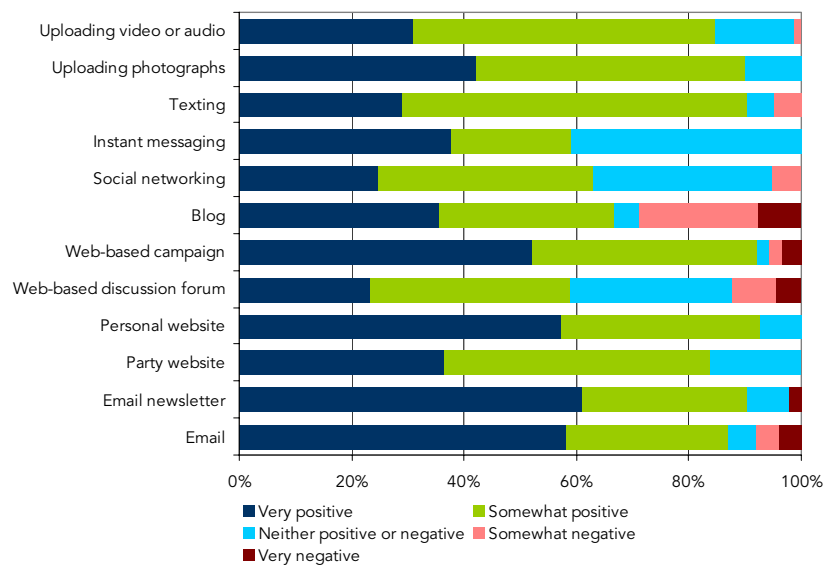


Figure 4: Perceived value of media used

Figure 5 shows the mean perceived values, where digital media scoring above zero can be seen as positively perceived and below zero as negatively perceived. Again, the media requiring the most effort and a more pro-active approach (discussion forums, blogs and social networking) rate the lowest but overall the perception of them remains positive. Email is an exception to this which could be explained by the more established nature of its use. The analysis across party lines reveals that Liberal Democrat MPs are more positive about the digital media they use than their Conservative colleagues, particularly when it comes to so-called Web2.0 technologies such as blogging, social network and uploading rich media (photographs, video and audio). Labour MPs fall somewhere in between, closely mirroring the average for all the major parties.

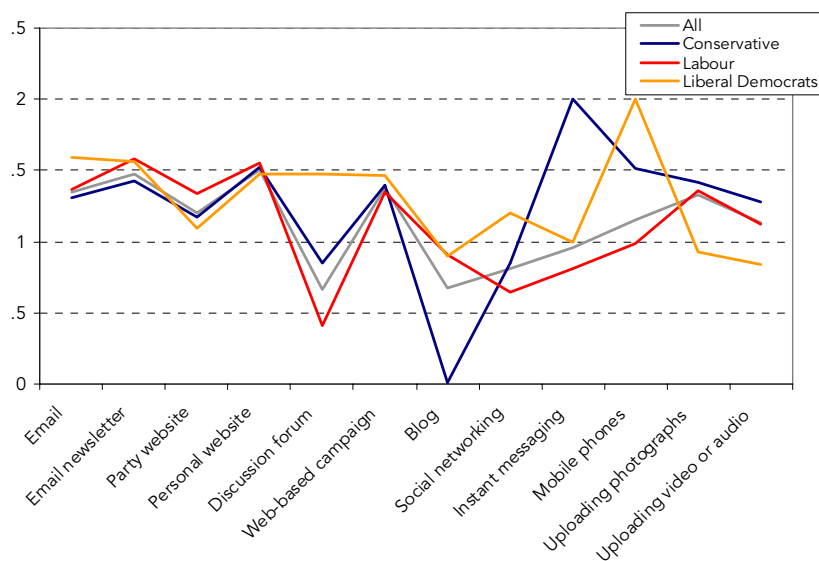


Figure 5: Mean perceived values of media used by party

Location appears to affect perceived value. As figure 6 shows, Welsh MPs are on the whole more positive about ICTs than their counterparts elsewhere; this is particularly the case for two of the most rapidly emerging media tools, social networking and uploading of rich media. MPs from Scotland and Northern Ireland see the least value in the technology that they use, actually rating web-based campaigning as being of negative value. Interestingly, blogging is perceived as being of negative value by more MPs born in or after 1960 (mean value of -0.5) and women MPs (-2.0). Age and length of time served as an MP has little impact on how an MP values new media. The marginality of constituency has limited impact, however, blogging is again an exception but this time in the positive; those MPs with large majorities are overwhelmingly positive about the value of blogging with a mean score of 2.0, well above the overall mean of 0.67.

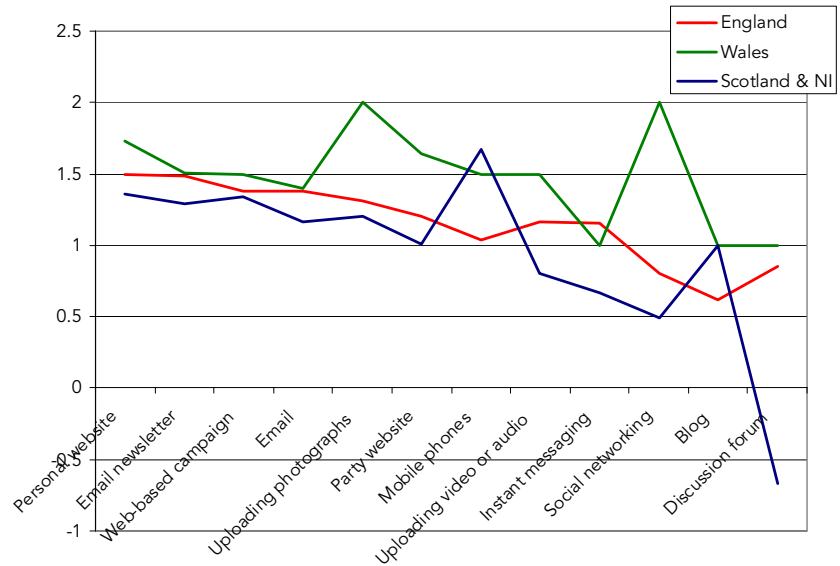


Figure 6: Mean perceived values of media used by country

Do MPs feel that they are using digital media enough?

The Liberal Democrats are the only party where the majority of MPs feel that they could be using ICT more. Fifty-six per cent disagree with the statement that their office is using digital technology as much as it needs to, while 33 per cent agree. More Welsh MPs (37 per cent) disagree, compared to 33 per cent that agree. Just under half of London MPs disagree that they are using technology enough (42 per cent agree, 14 per cent strongly). More female MPs disagree (50 per cent compared to 32 per cent that agree) while males tend to agree (45 per cent compared to 28 per cent that disagree).

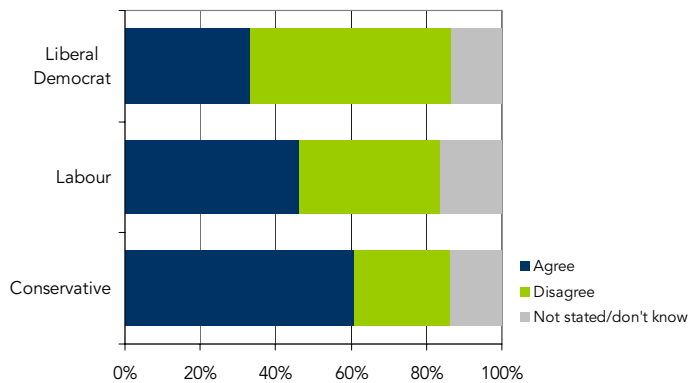


Figure 7: Using technology enough? By party

What would improve the way MPs' parliamentary offices use digital technologies?

Overall, 49 per cent of MPs agree or strongly agree that increasing the budget available for hardware would improve their use of digital media, whereas 32 per cent of MPs disagree. A much greater proportion of Liberal Democrats agree rather than

disagree, 57 per cent compared to 11 per cent. However, equal numbers of MPs born after 1960 agree and disagree.

The majority of MPs agree that increasing the budget that they have for software would be beneficial. Amongst Conservative MPs, the majority, however, disagree that this would be the case (45 per cent disagree while 32 per cent agree). The longer an MP has served, the more likely they are to believe that increasing software budgets would not be beneficial. Of those who have served since 1986 or earlier, 37 per cent agree (6 per cent strongly agree) whereas 50 per cent disagree (5 per cent strongly disagree). Amongst those MPs elected in or after 2005, 67 per cent agree (4 per cent strongly) and only 14 per cent disagree that better software budgets are needed.

The majority of MPs (82 per cent) think that having a greater awareness of digital media would improve the way their office uses it. Twenty-two per cent of those who agree, agree strongly. Twelve per cent of all MPs disagree, however, no female MPs disagree with this statement and 51 per cent strongly agree.

Training emerges as an important method of improving effective use. Figure 8 shows that 79 per cent of MPs agree that they would benefit from more training in the software applications that they use in their offices, 20 per cent of these strongly agreeing.

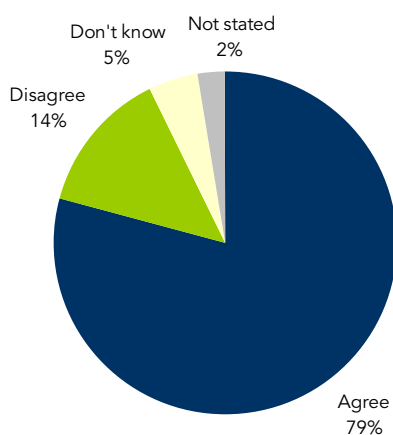


Figure 8: Is more training required in use of software?

The findings also reveal that staffing is an issue for almost half of the MPs surveyed. Forty-six per cent feel that an increase in their office staff would be beneficial in helping them to use digital media more effectively and efficiently. In turn, 37 per cent disagree with this position. Labour MPs feel the strongest about staffing levels with 54 per cent agreeing (26 per cent strongly) and 30 per cent disagreeing (2 per cent strongly).

The situation is almost reversed for Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs, however, who are more likely to disagree that increasing staff levels would lead to improvements in their use of digital media. English MPs are also more likely to consider staffing an issue than their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, where more MPs disagree with the statement that increased staffing levels would improve the use of digital media in their offices. There is also evidence of a small gender divide on this issue with 41 per cent of male MPs agreeing and 42 per cent disagreeing, whereas with female MPs 70 per cent agree and only 16 per cent disagree.

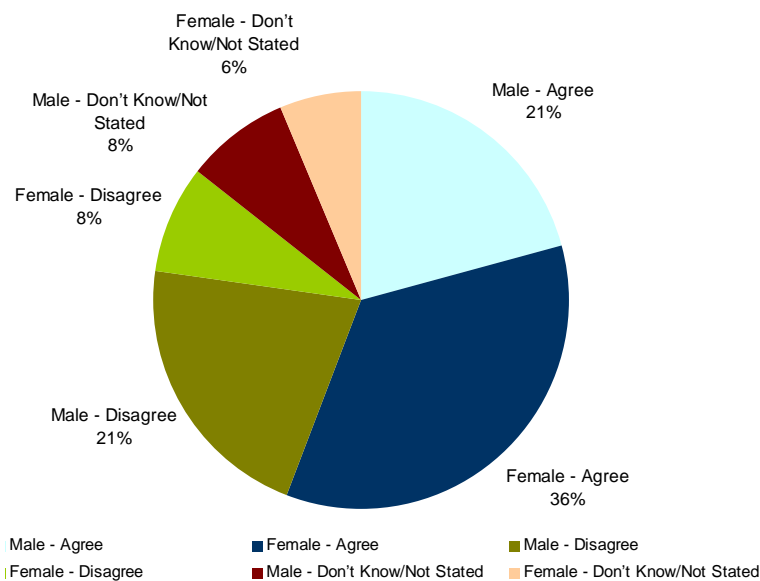


Figure 9: Increased staffing levels by gender

Summary of the survey findings

The findings in this survey are largely consistent with the outward facing surveys of MPs and their use of the internet, which is discussed earlier, and are supported by background research being undertaken by the Hansard Society on MPs and their use of social networking tools. It is clear from the survey that the internet has permeated the culture and day-to-day life of our MPs and that many value the benefits of internet use and greater connectivity. It is interesting to note some of the findings, not so much the saturation of email (as this might have been expected) but certainly the rapid adoption of social networking as a communications tool and the rather less than might be expected use of blogs – and concomitant reflection of respondents that they are seen as too onerous and of limited value.

Whilst adoption patterns suggest differences between the three major parties, it is too simplistic to suggest that one party is more internet-savvy than another – there are excellent examples of internet usage amongst all parties and equally numerous examples of late or non-adoption. Survey data in fact suggest that adoption relates more to the MP's majority, length of incumbency and, to some degree, the nature of the constituency (and constituents) than to the party that they belong to. MPs who hold a significant majority are far less likely to use the internet; as are those who have been MPs for a long time.

MPs are divided on whether they are adequately resourced to use the internet, however, they are overwhelmingly clear that they and their staff need more training. Many MPs feel that they are already using the internet enough and it is interesting to note that how they use the internet is divided by gender: Men are more likely to blog and women are more likely to network.

The next section of this report will describe a focus group of MPs and their staff and will then go on to describe the findings of the second phase of the research.

FOCUS GROUP

The second phase of the project was a focus group. This was held in late June 2008 at the Houses of Parliament and the purpose was to explore further the key themes to emerge from the initial survey of MPs. Invitations were sent to MPs to attend themselves or to nominate a researcher or member of their office staff to attend on their behalf. The focus group was semi-structured, lasted for one hour and there were 10 participants present; this consisted of three MPs, four researchers, two office managers and one parliamentary assistant. The following section discusses the findings of the focus group in more detail; direct quotations from focus group participants are included anonymously below and indented to identify them clearly.

As the survey findings suggest, the internet has transformed from a fringe tool to business as usual for many MPs and it is now not so much

about a glorified CV... it allows a very close intimate connection with constituents

The internet removes

the barriers to entry in politics just as it did in business, not only allowing people to contact you but there's a certain advantage of incumbency and MPs who don't get [the internet] will probably be gone [at the next election].

In general though, participants saw greater value in – and have a preference for – using the internet as a tool for organising their supporters and for campaigning. Whilst the internet – and email and social networking tools in particular – do allow closer links with constituents, MPs are less likely to take this active approach. Direct political engagement remains a largely untapped area and, on the whole, one that is not well understood by MPs.

Campaigning and publicity

MPs are most enthusiastic about the potential benefits of online media for campaigning. They see that it offers them ways of reaching a wider audience more quickly and of co-ordinating activists and staff. In particular, the ability to publish stories – either in print or video form – on specific issues relevant to their constituents through their own websites is seen as extremely important and significant:

The web allows me to cut out the local media and communicate directly... [it] gets the news I want in the papers and now I do get it in because they just take it off the website.

[I can] put up local stories about people in the constituency and the local media sources stories from this as per [MP] but they also cite the website as the source, so it creates this symbiotic relationship with the local media.

Video publishing is particularly useful for one MP in a rural constituency, who notes that it is almost impossible to get the local television station to send out a reporter to interview him or cover his constituency events because it is too far from their studio. He notes that

putting video on a website attracts a lot of interest, including the local TV media, who then picks up on the story and will ask to use the video.

Feedback from constituents reported by MPs suggests that the public see their amateur video attempts and clips of speeches in Parliament as 'authentic' and they are received positively. 'Home-made' video, particularly where it shows constituents or local issues rather than the MP talking is particularly well received. Those MPs using video did note that they have had challenges working with the parliamentary authorities when trying to use clips of their speeches and that this could be a barrier to others.

An alternative use of video was mentioned by one MP who talked about capturing constituents' opinions about local issues so that he could then share their stories with the local (or national) organisations responsible for the problems, such as transport companies, utility providers or the health service. This is a rare example of an MP using digital technologies to enhance their role as an advocate on behalf of their constituents.

Blogging

Blogs are another form of predominantly top-down communication – they usually allow comments but many MPs do not have this facility enabled on their blogs. The focus group participants generally echoed the views of the wider survey in being generally quite negative towards blogs. Although one MP was overwhelmingly positive, seeing blogs as a way of raising and sustaining debates around local issues, others were sceptical and, in some cases, critical of them, seeing blogs as time-consuming and of limited value. There was also a clear concern articulated that blogs can be a negative by providing the opposition with ammunition or publicity. As the MP in favour of blogs noted,

I never mention the opposition on my blog and this annoys them more.

There is also a perceived reputational problem for the blogosphere in general. It is seen as unaccountable, even abusive. Politicians are public figures and the focus group participants note that this can result in them being attacked and even having spoof blogs set up, one reporting having to take legal action to remedy the latter situation. No issue was taken with fair criticism, only of personal attacks but there was a perception that this is much more likely to happen in the unregulated world of blogs. A benefit of the blog culture was that

we live in the age of anti-politics and as politicians we isolate ourselves in the Westminster bubble and we get what we deserve and the internet brings it home to us... I like the authenticity and the verve, it sometimes lapses into brashness and the occasional boorishness but blogs are probably a much more accurate reflection on what people actually think.

Of those MPs that do blog, they largely write the articles themselves but office staff are most often responsible for editing a post before it is published. One MP, perhaps rather tongue in cheek, suggested that their staff were not keen on blogging

because it will be either boring and no one will want to read it or it will too interesting and end up in the newspapers for writing the wrong thing.

Email

The survey showed that email is the primary internet-based tool used by MPs yet the literature suggests that many still struggle with managing emails, both in terms of quantity and how best to respond, and focus group participants confirm this. The protocols of the House create some problems for MPs handling emails, since they must ensure that they are only dealing with their own constituents – a challenge in the age of email. Whilst the quantity of emails received has increased dramatically for MPs, for most there has been no corresponding fall in the number of letters received. One exception was noted by an MP who reports a reversal from a ratio of receiving one email for every nine letters 10 years ago to now getting 90 per cent of their constituency correspondence by email. This suggests that email has had a democratising effect, closing the gap between constituents and their MPs.

Email is not seen as the domain of younger constituents either. One MP from an area with a high percentage of retirees challenges the perception that the internet is a not medium for older people, observing that he receives email from

a huge number of retired folk who are pretty technology savvy. The email they send they would have written [in the past].

The volume of emails being received was raised as an issue for MPs' offices and this leads to attempts to down-play the expectations of constituents using email:

We try and turn emails around in a week but it is very difficult as we get so many and like [MP] try not to give priority to email users.

Obviously if it's an urgent case you would deal with it but people do expect an instant response and we can't give them that.

Solutions amongst the participants invariably include asking for a postal address – one does this in an auto-reply message that goes out in response to every email received. Some MPs will only respond to emails with a physical letter, one reason for this being that

people get a thrill out of getting a letter compared to an email.

A contrary position was argued that a constituent is equally or even more likely to be impressed with the fact that they had held a conversation of sorts via an email exchange with their MP – although this assumes that the MP is proactively responding to their email on a very frequent basis. Another reason cited for replying by letter is that using email can create an inequitable expectation of receiving an instantaneous reply

and that's not going to happen... they have to wait three or four weeks like everybody else does.

Only one MP present was proactively responding to emails personally, setting aside time every day to quickly reply and then deciding from there which emails to deal with directly or forward to their office staff.

Given the increasing popularity of email as an inward communication media and the general focus of MPs on the internet as an outward communications tool, there was a surprising lack of interest in email newsletters. These appear under utilised and there was concern over the handling of email lists, MPs noting concerns over data protection issues.

Social Networking

The recent emergence of and rapid increase in the use of social networking reported in the survey is reflected in comments from focus group participants that suggest they are unclear about how best to use social networking tools – a finding supported by concurrent Hansard Society research on MPs and social networking that identifies four unrelated reasons for MPs adopting social networking: Organisational, activism (issues based), campaigning and just to be there! The primary reason for adopting social networking tools for most MPs would appear to be personal marketing.

Most MPs are happy to accept 'friend' requests on sites such as Facebook (which is the most widely adopted social networking tool amongst MPs). However, one participant noted that their Facebook page was only open to party activists that they had a clear policy for 'friending':

I don't let people on to my social networking site unless I know who they are and also if I know that they are a political activist... if you're on my Facebook then you know what I'm doing and I'm being careful about what I'm doing!

The same MP noted that the main opposition party in their constituency had a public Facebook page and from this it was easy to track what they were planning and where they intended to campaign or leaflet drop. Another insight into MPs' strategies with tools such as Facebook comes from another participant and echoes attitudes revealed in the survey:

We just set up in the last week a Facebook account [and we're] taking a slightly scattergun approach to adding friends.

Generally, social networking tools have not been used as a primary communication tool, although one MP's office observed that they had received a very small number of messages via Facebook that related to casework.

Digital Deficit

Concerns were raised about the exclusionary nature of the internet, particularly by MPs in lower socio-economic constituencies. There was debate about the effects of the digital divide between classes, in respect to urban and rural constituencies and the necessity of not excluding people from the process because they did not have access to the internet. There does seem to be some disagreement, at times almost polar, in terms of who these people being excluded actually are – for example the elderly are suggested as both benefiting from and being excluded by internet engagement (this exclusion observed could be socio-economic rather than age-related). Access is available for the disadvantaged through

UKOnline centres and libraries with internet access.

However, as the literature suggests, this does not directly compensate for the lack of immediate access at home or in the workplace and, as one participant also noted,

it's about confidence as well, [the internet] is outside what people are used to.

Summary of focus group findings

The focus group supports the findings of the survey, showing that where it is adopted the internet can and has changed the relationship between MPs and their constituents. The key findings of the focus group emphasise the value of the internet as a tool to communicate with constituents, in part by circumventing the local media but also by targeting local media through web-based publishing that provides them with readily available content. The findings reinforce that the internet is largely being used as a tool to publish, not as a tool to engage. Whilst there is a significant rise in social networking this seems to be either as a tool to manage campaigning, for awareness building or as a further channel for publishing. Blogging is seen as a relatively poor value tool, in part because of the time commitment but also because of the negative connotations of the blogosphere in general. MPs face procedural challenges when adopting the internet and have to develop strategies for dealing equitably with electronic and postal correspondence; there is clear awareness that a digital underclass exists and that they must not be disadvantaged further. The internet also presents challenges in terms of workload and identifying the location of correspondents, all adding pressure to MPs' offices. It is also clear that, where an MP chooses to, they can adopt different, more direct and immediate practices relating to email and that when they do this is well-received by their constituents.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that the internet is now a part of the day-to-day life of the vast majority of MPs. Email adoption has reached saturation point and the use of websites is commonplace. MPs see digital media as largely positive in supporting their communication with constituents. This is particularly the case for email and websites but also for the ability to upload rich media, including photographs and video. Less valued are tools that can be used for more direct engagement with constituents. This is reflected in the way MPs use the internet – it is seen and used primarily as a tool for communicating to, rather than engaging with, constituents. It is equally important to recognise that the internet supports traditional – offline – forms of engagement, communication and campaigning, it does not by and large replace them.

The almost universal use of email and the adoption of websites support findings elsewhere and are not surprising. It is interesting to see this adoption pattern continuing, albeit at lower levels, for newer internet tools and particularly for Web2.0 technologies such as social networking. This suggests the potential for greater engagement and closer ties in the future, even if at present social networking remains predominantly a tool to keep constituents informed and the MP on their radar or as a tool to manage campaigning. Whatever the reasons for its adoption, social networking has seen a considerable rise in usage and the survey findings suggest that this will continue to grow. Blogs, on the other hand, whilst popular with the media and the technorati, are in fact less likely to be used by MPs and are seen as problematic because of the time required and because it is difficult to target an audience or to isolate constituents (also a perceived problem with social networking). The poor reputation of the blogosphere in general does not help build a strong argument for their use.

Whilst adoption patterns suggest differences between the three major parties, it is too simplistic to suggest that one party is more internet-savvy than another – there are excellent examples of internet usage amongst all parties and equally numerous examples of late or non-adoption. Adoption reflects a traditional range from early adopters to technology laggards and the factors likely to increase adoption appear more to do with the individual circumstances of an MP than a party-led strategy, attitude or edict. Survey data in fact suggest that adoption relates more to the MP's majority, length of incumbency and, to some degree, the nature of the constituency (and constituents) than to the party that they belong to. MPs who hold a significant majority are far less likely to use the internet; as are those who have been MPs for a long time. The focus group findings support this. Therefore, we conclude that adoption of the internet is largely down to personal attitudes to technology but that it is further affected by the surety of the MP's incumbency.

MPs face procedural challenges when adopting the internet and have to develop strategies for dealing equitably with electronic and postal correspondence; there is awareness that a digital underclass exists and that they must not be disadvantaged

further. The internet also presents challenges in terms of workload and identifying the location of correspondents, all adding pressure to MPs' offices. It is also clear that, where an MP chooses to, they can adopt different, more direct and immediate practices relating to email and that when they do this it is well received by their constituents.

MPs are divided on whether they are adequately resourced to use the internet, however, they are overwhelmingly clear that they and their staff need more training. Many MPs feel that they are already using the internet enough and it is interesting to note that how they use the internet is divided by gender: Men are more likely to blog and women are more likely to network.

Recommendations

For MPs and other elected representatives:

1. MPs need to develop a clear policy for the use of email and publicise this clearly on their websites, in automatic responses to senders (the latter is especially important if they do not intend to respond immediately or will respond by letter) and in other material where the use of email is promoted.
2. To be effective, MPs need a strategy for online media that must consider:
 - a. who is the target audience (constituent, wider public, interest groups, local media, party supporters and activists)
 - b. is the site interactive, allowing comments and responses, or passive (publish only)?
 - c. what are the costs (development and ongoing) and what other resources are needed (people, time and skills)
 - d. that successful online strategies involve multiple media, potentially including a mixture of email, email newsletters, websites, blog and social networking.
3. The online strategy needs to connect with the offline strategy – the internet does not exist in isolation.
4. Blogs and websites are appropriate sources for MPs to publish news and other material and the audience for these can be local media and not just constituents or interest groups; this recognises the network multiplier effects of the internet to expand distribution of content beyond those who can be reached directly.
5. Use one online medium to cross-promote another:
 - a. Create links from websites to social networking pages and vice versa
 - b. Ensure people referencing material provide a link to the source.
6. Significant opportunities exist, particularly with new web 2.0 technologies, to harness online media in ways that engage, rather than just communicate with, constituents.

7. Recognise the symbiotic potential of community-created digital media, including community websites and local digital democracy projects and be supportive of third-party projects that promote democratic engagement.

For constituents:

8. The internet clearly enables more effective communication between MPs and their constituents. Where this is not occurring, constituents could canvas their MPs to encourage them to adopt appropriate digital media. Providing examples of good practice is one way of breaking down barriers amongst those who are more resistant.
9. Constituents should demand information and communication in digital form if this is their preference.
10. MPs see the internet as primarily a tool to communicate and campaign, however, individual citizens and civil society groups can take the lead, creating engagement tools online and encouraging MPs to then take part. Digital democracy can be driven by both sides.

For Parliament:

11. Parliamentary authorities need to review the availability of and access to their own digital archives and consider issues of licensing and re-use for content created by Parliament.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Survey questions

Q1 Which of the following technologies do you or your parliamentary office use to communicate with your constituents and how long have you been using them?

	Don't use and don't plan on using	Don't use but plan on using within six months	Used for six months or less	Used for more than six months but less than one year	Used for between one year and three years	Used for more than three years	Have used but do not use now
Email (for correspondence)							
Email newsletter							
Party website							
Personal website							
Web-based discussion forum							
Web-based campaign							
Blog							
Social networking (such as Facebook or MySpace)							
Instant messaging (such as Windows Live Messenger)							
Texting to mobile phones							
Uploading photographs							
Uploading video or audio							
Other (please specify)							

Q2 Of the technologies that you or your office has used, how would you rate them in terms of their ability to support how you communicate with your constituents (and them with you)?

	Not applicable (don't use)	Very positive	Some-what positive	Neither positive or negative	Some-what negative	Very negative	Don't know
Email (for correspondence)							
Email newsletter							
Party website							
Personal website							
Web-based discussion forum							
Web-based campaign							
Blog							
Social networking (such as Facebook or MySpace)							
Instant messaging (such as MSN)							

Messenger)							
Texting to mobile phones							
Uploading photographs							
Uploading video or audio							
Other (please specify)							

Q3 Which of the following would improve the way that your parliamentary office uses digital technologies (select all that apply)?

- The office is already using digital technology as much as it needs to
- Increasing the budget for hardware
- Increasing the budget for software
- Greater awareness of what new technologies can do
- More training in the use of software applications
- Increased staffing levels
- Other (please specify):

Q4 How has the use of new technology affected the way you communicate with your constituents?

- It has made communication much more effective
- It has made communication somewhat more effective
- It makes no difference
- It has made communication somewhat less effective
- It has made communication much less effective

Q5 What are the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies, such as social networking, blogging, email, audio, with regards to communication between you and your constituents?

[Open ended response]

Hansard Society

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