A PROPOSAL FOR A REVISED SET OF GUIDELINES FOR PARLIAMENTARY WEBSITE

In 2000 the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) published its *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Websites.* The draft guidelines below represent an effort to update that important document by taking into account new technologies and practices that have emerged in the last several years. A group of experts is currently evaluating and revising these proposed guidelines and would welcome comments from conference participants and other interested stakeholders.

Comments should be sent via email to Jeffrey Griffith, Senior Advisor and Chair of the Advisory Group on Websites, Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, at jeff@jandjgriffith.com. A digital copy of this draft can be found at the website of the Global Centre:

www.ictparliament.org/worldeparliamentconference2008/documentation.htm

Many of the guidelines in the original IPU publication have been included in this draft. New guidelines not in the original IPU list but proposed here are marked with a double asterisk** at the end of the guideline. A few guidelines that have been substantially modified from their original language are also marked with a double asterisk.

Editorial questions and issues requiring further consideration are enclosed in brackets [ ].

Background and Context

Websites have become one of the most important windows for citizens to view the work of their legislatures. They offer a proactive way in which parliaments can communicate with citizens to enhance public understanding of the legislature's role and responsibilities. In countries where the Internet is widely available, they have become the primary means for people to learn what their members have said and done, as well as what laws the legislature has passed or rejected. As access to high speed telecommunications continues to grow on a global basis, this will become true for nearly all countries with legislative bodies.

Parliamentary websites are also important tools for the members, committees, leaders, and officials of the legislature itself. They are often the fastest and most reliable method for obtaining copies of draft bills, receiving agendas, getting summaries of committee actions and the text of committee-documents, and learningwhat other members have said and how they have voted. They have become essential for enabling members to carrying out their own legislative and oversight work.

Official parliamentary websites, however, are not the only source for citizens and members to obtain information about the legislature. Websites dealing with public policy and with legislative and oversight issues are being maintained by civil society, by lobbying groups, by political parties, and by commercial companies. Especially among higher income countries, there is a wide range of web-based sources that provide information similar to that maintained on parliamentary sites. They often have particular viewpoints and include commentary about the work of the parliament. These sites are likely to continue to grow on a world-wide basis as access to technology increases and as economic and political issues become more globally intertwined.

This increase in the number of sources that provide information and opinions about public policy issues, however, makes it even more important that the official site of the legislature be authoritative and non-partisan, and that it provide timely, accurate and comprehensive information. The website must be easy to understand and use, be accessible to all, and be free of charge. Finally, it must be well managed and supported so that it can grow with the needs of both citizens and members, keep pace with advances in technology, and support the goals of the parliament.

During the past decade the objectives of parliamentary websites have evolved and become more complex and more challenging. They began with the goal of providing basic information about the history, the functions, and the members of the legislature. They were soon tasked to provide copies of official texts of proposed legislation, then the verbatim accounts of debates and summaries of plenary actions, and copies of committee documents. As the interactive web has emerged they have been asked to include tools that encourage two-way communication between members and citizens, inviting them to share their views and possibly engaging them in the policy process.

Websites have also had to provide improved methods of access. In addition to obtaining copies of texts, many members and citizens now use search engines to find specific documents and speeches. Alerting services enable them to be notified of the introduction and changes in proposed legislation, the filing of committee documents, and members' activities and speeches. Increasingly, they can learn about the parliament through a variety of media such as TV and webcasting, either live or through an on-demand archive.

Parliaments have been further challenged to improve the usability of their websites, ensuring that they are understandable and easy to operate. They have also had to enhance the accessibility of their websites, ensuring that they can be used by all, including those with disabilities. And they have had to address a variety of related issues, such as multiple official languages and a digital divide that can result in some citizens being excluded from the web.

Guidelines for websites need to reflect this growing list of objectives and the latest reliable and available technologies for achieving them. The guidelines published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 2000 provided an excellent basis for building effective websites. Technology and practices of parliaments have advanced in the last several years, however, and it has become important to update the guidelines to reflect these changes. As the IPU *Guidelines* stated in its introductory chapter *"Internet technology is constantly evolving. It [will be] necessary to review and update the Guidelines in the light of future developments.*

Based on the evolution of technology and of parliamentary websites in the last decade, it is proposed that recommendations be provided in the following areas:

1. Basic information about parliament.
2. Texts and status of proposed legislation
3. Documents and activities of committees
4. Text of debate and actions taken in plenary
5. Access and dissemination tools
6. Usability and accessibility
7. Interactive communication between citizens and members
8. Oversight and management

In addition, the recommendations should make reference to the importance of the quality of the information provided, especially its accuracy, timeliness, completeness, and clarity. They should also note the growing importance of open standards to support the capacity to share and preserve legislative documents.

In updating the guidelines, it is also essential to note the increasing use of websites by both committees and members. In many parliaments, committees play a key role in the legislative and oversight process. This role can vary considerably among countries depending on their particular rules and procedures. Therefore guidelines for committee websites warrant a separate effort that can take into account the differences among parliaments regarding such bodies. However, because of the importance of committee actions and documents in the legislative process in many countries, these records should be included within the revised recommendations for parliamentary websites. -

Member websites are also growing in number and potential importance. However, these sites often have different goals, objectives, and rules that govern their creation and use. It is therefore suggested that a separate project should be considered for the development of recommendations for the websites of members.

1. Content: general information about the people, organization, and work of the parliament

1.1 Access to parliament

Recommended

    A. Practical information on **access to the parliamentary building**, library and archives [General editorial question: Should all guidelines be considered as "when applicable" thereby allowing this designation to be omitted for any particular guideline?]

    B. Diagram of **seating arrangements** in the parliamentary meeting room

    C. **Publicity** to make members and citizens aware of parliament's website and how it can be accessed.**

    D. A page (printed and online) explaining the **organization of the website****

Optional

    E. (Virtual) "Guided tour" of the **parliamentary building**

1.2 History of parliament

    A. **Brief history** of the national parliamentary institution

1.3 Functions and activities of parliament

Recommended

    A. Overview of **composition and functions** of the national parliament and its constituent bodies, including a description of the specific role of each parliamentary chamber (for bicameral parliaments) and non-plenary bodies (committees, commissions, etc.)

    B. Overview of **parliamentary procedure** and **routine order of business**

    C. Full **text of** the **Standing Orders,** Rules of Procedure or similar rule- setting documents

    D. Text of the country's **Constitution**

    E. List **of international and regional parliamentary assemblies** of which the parliament is a member

    F. **Statistics** on the activities of the current parliament

    G. Diagram/organization chart and functions of the **Secretariat** of Parliament together with the name of and other relevant information about the Secretary General/Clerk of Parliament and **other independent heads of bureaus**

Optional

    H. Texts of **official press releases** of the parliament

    I. **Statistics** on the activities of the previous parliament **

1.4 Elected leaders and officials

Recommended

    A. **Biodata** of the current and previous Presiding Officer of the parliament or parliamentary chamber

    B. Brief description of the Presiding Officer's **powers and prerogatives**

    C. Names of **Deputy-** and/or **Vice-Presidents**

[Should party leaders be added here?]

1.5 Parliamentary bodies

[Does a distinction need to be made between committees and other bodies? What should be the relationship of these guidelines to guidelines in section 2 below relating to committee documents?]

Recommended

    A. Complete **list of non-plenary parliamentary bodies** with hyperlinks to separate pages devoted to each body in that category

    B. Description of the **mandate and terms of reference** of each parliamentary body.

    C. **Membership** and names of **presiding officer(s)** of each parliamentary body

    D. Information on **current business** and data on upcoming meetings.

    E. **Schedule** of meetings and hearings held by each parliamentary body

    F. **Summary** of legislative and oversight **actions taken. ****

    G. Relevant **contact information** (addresses, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail) of each body

    H. **Documents,** including reports, hearings, press releases and other relevant material, pertaining to the work of each body **

    F. Composition and other relevant current and historical information concerning the **National IPU Group, parliamentary friendship groups** as well as national **delegations to international and regional parliamentary assemblies** of which the parliament is **a** member.

1.6 Members of parliament

Recommended

    A. Up-to-date **list of all members** of Parliament (current legislature) with **biodata** and information about each MP's constituency, party affiliation, and membership in parliamentary committees and/or commissions, and with hyperlinks to MPs' personal Websites.

    B. List with biodata of **all members of Parliament of all previous legislatures,** with clearly specified dates.

    C. **Contact information** for each Member of Parliament including his or her e-mail address

    D. **List of former members of parliament who have resigned from the current legislature or whose membership ceased** for any other reason.

    E. Public **record of voting** by individual members of parliament

Optional

    F. Basic information concerning the **status of a Member of Parliament,** such as parliamentary immunity, inviolability, salaries and allowances, etc.

1.7 Electoral system

Recommended

    A. **Explanation of the election procedure** (voting system, electoral divisions/constituencies, who votes, who can be elected, nomination requirements, who conducts the election, etc.)

    B. Results of the last elections by **party affiliation** and **constituency**

    C. **Current composition** of party groups and coalitions

    D. Links to **party websites**

1.8 Publications

Recommended

    A. **List** of **information and documents available** in both printed and digital formats from parliament and how to obtain them. [Expanded from original version.]

B. Information and documents made available through a variety of means, including traditional **onsite purchasing, online ordering and delivery, and digital download.** [Expanded from original version.]

1.9 General links to websites

Recommended

A. The **other chamber** in a bicameral parliament

B. The country's **Presidency, Government, Constitutional and Supreme Courts**

C. **Ministries** and other national agencies

D. **State/provincial legislatures**

E. National political **parties**

F. Individual **members** of parliament

G. Inter-Parliamentary Union **(IPU)**

H. Other international, regional, and sub-regional **parliamentary organizations**

I. **National parliaments** of other countries

2. Content: legislation and oversight

2.1. Legislative and oversight activities and agenda

Recommended

A. Schematic explanation of the **legislative process**

B. **Glossary** of parliamentary procedure

C. **Legislative agenda** and schedule of the current session (plenary and committees.

D. **Status of current parliamentary business** including bill number, topic, title, date, document code, parliamentary body, etc.

2.2 Proposed legislation

Recommended

A. Text and status of all **proposed legislation** in the **current session****

B. Text and status of all proposed legislation from the **previous** session**

 [Should there be a guideline recommending that a parliament provide the text and status of proposed legislation from ALL previous sessions? This question applies to 2.3 Committee Activities and Documents and 2.4 Plenary Activities and Documents listed below.]

2.3 Committee Activities and Documents

Recommended

A. Text of **committee documents,** including reports, records, hearings, votes and other activities in **the current** session.**

B. Text **of committee documents,** including reports, records, hearings, votes and other activities from *the previous session***

[Should there be separate recommendations for each type of committee document?]

2.4 Plenary Activities and Documents

Recommended

> A. Summary of actions taken in **current plenary session** and **text of statements and debates. ****
>
> B. Summary of actions taken in **previous plenary session** and **text of statements and debates.** **

[Should summaries be listed separately from texts of statements and debates?]

2.5 Budget and Financial Legislation

Recommended

> A. Provide information about **budget and financial legislation** and actions that makes this policy area easier to find and to understand.**

2.6 Parliamentary Questions and Inquiries Addressed *to* Executive Branch

Recommended

> A. Text of **parliamentary questions** and inquiries addressed to the government (executive branch) in the **current** session.
>
> B. Text of **parliamentary questions** and inquiries addressed to the government (executive branch) in the previous session**

2.7 Links related to specific documents and information

Recommended

> A. **Links** to **parliamentary documents** and items of information related to proposed legislation or oversight activities **
>
> B. Links to **government documents** and items of information related to proposed legislation or oversight activities **
>
> C. Links to **civil society documents** and items of information related to proposed legislation or oversight activities **

2.8 Quality of Information

Recommended

> A. Establish manual or automated procedures and systems **to ensure** the **accuracy** of proposed legislation available on the website **
>
> B. Ensure that the text of proposed legislation and accompanying actions and reports are available on the website **as soon as they are available to the leaders and members** **
>
> C. Provide **explanatory material** that makes the text of legislation and procedural steps as understandable as possible **
>
> D. Provide material that **explains the context** and **assesses the possible impact** of proposed legislation **
>
> E. Prepare at least one of the major types of legislative documents – proposed legislation, committee documents, or plenary debate - in an **open standard format**.

3. Access tools

3.1 Search Engine and Databases

Recommended

A. Provide a **search engine** that can be applied to parliamentary databases and used by members, staff, and the public to search and sort by major elements including text words, status of legislation, dates of actions, sponsors, committees, political parties, and other elements as required by the leadership, committees, and members **

B. Provide the following **searchable databases** for information and documents from the **current** session: **

1) Member information **

2) Members' voting records **

3) All proposed legislation **

4) Committee reports, records, hearings, votes and other parliamentary documents

5) Summary of plenary actions taken and the text of plenary statements and debates **

6) Text of parliamentary questions and inquiries addressed to executive branch * *

C. Provide the following **searchable databases** when the information and documents from **previous sessions** are available **

1) Member information **

2) Members' voting records **

3) All proposed legislation **

4) Committee reports, records, hearings, votes and other parliamentary documents **

5) Summary of plenary actions taken and the text of plenary statements and debates * *

6) Text of parliamentary questions and inquiries addressed to executive branch **

D. Provide the capacity to **link searches of the text of plenary sessions to the televised or webcast** session **

3.2 Television and webcasting

Recommended

A. Televise or webcast **major plenary sessions live** **

B. Provide an archive of televised or webcast plenary sessions that permits **on-demand viewing** **

C. Televise or webcast **major committee meetings live** **

D. Provide an archive of televised or webcast committee meetings that permits **on-demand viewing** **

E. Televise or webcast other **important parliamentary events live** **

F. Provide an archive of other important parliamentary events that have been televised or webcast and that **permits on-demand viewing** **

3.3 Alerting services

Recommended

A. **Alerting services** (through email, RSS, or other appropriate technologies) that enable members and the public to be informed about;

1) Introduction and changes in the status and text of legislation **

2) Member activities **

3) Committee activities **

4) Plenary activities **

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4. Interactivity tools

4.1 General feedback

Recommended

    A. A **feedback utility** that allows users to send comments and ask questions about any section of the website.

    B. Information about options and recommended **ways to contact members, committees, and officials** of the parliament including in person, by phone, in paper, and through the web. **

4.2 Communication between members and citizens

Recommended

    A. The capacity to contact members, committees, and officials of parliament by **unstructured email messages or email forms. ***

    B. **Tools** to enable members, committee, and officials to efficiently **receive, manage, and respond to email** from citizens and civil society **

    C. **Interactive tools** that can support blogs, online fora and discussions, e-petitions, and other new means for interacting with citizens. **

    D. **Testing and implementation** of new methods for citizen-parliament interaction as the technologies emerge and as they prove useful to parliaments. [Make *Optional? ***]

Optional

    E. Systems for allowing **online polling** when the subject matter is sufficiently important and the results can be considered helpful.

5. Usability[1], accessibility[2], and general design

5.1 User testing

Recommended

    A. Conduct **user testing** and employ other **usability methods** for ensuring that the design and use of the website is understandable by its intended audiences**

    B. Conduct **user testing** whenever **major changes** are made in the design and operation of the website **

5.2 Accessibility standards

    A. Implement **W3C standards or other applicable standards** for ensuring that the website can be used by those with **disabilities ***

5.3 Languages

Recommended

    A. For countries with two or more official languages, make the entire content of the parliamentary Website available in at least **one of the official languages** of the country. [Should this be revised to say in **"all official languages"?**]

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[1] Usability here refers here to scientific methods for determining how to design websites and web pages so that they are clear and understandable to their intended audiences.

[2] Accessibility here refers to methods for enabling those with visual, hearing, and other disabilities to understand and utilize a website.

B. Make a complete or partial version of the site in **one of the languages of international communication**, usually **English** [Should English be specified here or dropped?]. If a partial version is made it available, it should focus on providing [summaries of major legislative actions and proposed bills.?]

5.4 General design elements

Recommended

A. Include the following **"good design" elements**

    a. Frequently Asked Questions

    b. What's new

    c. Site map

    d. About **

    e. Staff vacancies

B. Support **rapid downloading** of large documents during user sessions

C. Permit and support **high speed downloading** of all **files** in **an open standard format** to enable parliamentary documents and information to be incorporated into other government, civil society, and private sector systems and websites.**

D. Support **multiple browsers and ensure backward compatibility** of new features and content with the most frequently used browsers.

E. Provide information and documents appropriate for the **intended audiences**.

6. Oversight and management

6.1 Leadership, Authority, Support

A. Ensure the website has the **approval and support** of the **highest parliamentary and administrative authorities** **

B. Ensure adequate **long term funding and trained staff** (internal, external, **or a** combination) **

C. Ensure an **adequate and secure technical infrastructure** **

6.2 Strategic vision and planning

A. Define the **goals of the website** in writing **

B. Define the **needs of the intended audiences** in writing **

6.3 Roles and responsibilities

A. Establish a **team** responsible for ensuring that **content is timely and accurate****

B. Ensure **a** high level of **collaboration among the staff** responsible for content and staff responsible for technical systems **

6.4 Promotion and integration

A. **Promote the use of the website** to its intended audiences **

B. Support the **integration of the website** with other government and civil society websites **