

Phile or Phobe? Australian and British MPs and the New Communications Technology

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Paper prepared for presentation at the 100th Annual meeting of the American Political
Science Association, Chicago, 31 August – 4 September 2004

Introduction¹

This paper compares the adoption of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by Australian and UK legislators, with a view toward how this may affect styles of representation and roles of the MPs in the two polities. In particular we provide an overall picture of the scope of current activity in each country in terms of website adoption, and whether this is accelerating over time. In addition we profile the basic functions that legislators are using their websites for and what differences, if any, emerge in approach across the two systems. Finally, we examine factors at the individual, organisational and systemic level that might help explain the variance in rates and levels of uptake of the new technology. In addressing these issues we build on the extant literature that has examined the individual and organisational factors that have influenced candidates and parties adoption of ICTs in the UK and Australia as well as a range of other countries (Ward and Gibson, 2003; Gibson and McAllister, 2003; Gibson and Römmele, 2003). In addition, the paper comparatively extends to Australia our recent benchmarking work on British MPs' use of the Internet (Ward & Lusoli, 2004), which helps illuminate the macro and institutional-level factors influencing the diffusion of ICTs among elected representatives. We are thus able to examine larger questions about the extent to which national traits are determinative of political and particularly representational uses of the Web, over and above micro- and meso-level factors as well as of course, the imperatives of the technology itself. Finally, we can begin to start to look more broadly at what the new ICTs can offer to traditional models of representation in rapidly changing advanced industrial democracies.

¹ The authors are grateful for the support of the ESRC's E-Society programme - Award no. RES-335-25-0029. Data collection of such breadth would be impossible without the help of numerous colleagues. We wish to thank Prof. Longley and his E-Society colleagues at UCL for providing data on Internet penetration at constituency level in the UK; Prof. Iain McLean and colleagues at Oxford for making available UK MP-level demographic data in readily usable format; Richard Kimber at Keele for providing online 'neat and clean' 2001 UK election results. We need to thank Emma Higginson at Epolitix.com for making available numbers and addresses of MPs websites currently on their system. Finally, we acknowledge the use of Norris and Loveduski's British Representation Study (BRS) 2001 for UK MPs use of ICTs. In Australia, we need to thank Clive Bean and colleagues for making available the Australian Candidate Study (Bean, Gow, McAllister, & Gibson, 2001), and the Australian Social Science Data Archive, especially Sophie Holloway, for provision at very short notice. For advising on and making available Australian data on electorate marginality (Bennett, Newman, & Kopras, 2002), rebellions and MPs biographies we need to thank Sarah Miskin, Research Specialist with the Australian Department of the Parliamentary Library. Finally, we wish to thank the participants to an ACSR Seminar held at the ANU in July 2004, where we presented a paper based on the UK section of the data, for the indispensable 'local knowledge' that makes this paper possible. Of course, we bear full and sole responsibility for the consolidation, update, analysis and interpretation of data.

1 Representation and roles of MPs in the UK and Australia

Literature on parliamentary representation points to a number of similarities and differences between Australia and the UK. Both systems operate under a Westminster model of government at the national level, with the executive being drawn from a more powerful lower house to which it is accountable. Governments are usually formed on a majoritarian basis from one of two main parties within the legislature and thus command strong support for their policy proposals. As the trend toward ever stronger or responsible parties has taken hold of course, like other modern democracies, both systems have seen the erosion of parliaments' independence and a shift toward party-led government. This has been observed most notably in the Australian case, with instances of rebellion against the party line becoming increasingly rare. Two abstentions have been recorded for the parliament elected in 2001, a decline from the handful recorded since 1998. This level of constraint among the parliamentary parties has been supported by high levels of partisanship among the electorate, again especially in Australia. Although electoral volatility has increased in recent years, party identification in Australia has remained relatively stable, although the numbers of strong identifiers has declined (Studlar & McAllister, 1996). The UK has experienced less stable patterns of identification, although the 1997 landslide win for Labour signalled a return to the fold for many voters, marred only by dips relating to the second Gulf War and the ensuing dispute on weapons of mass destruction.

Beyond the 'inbuilt' or institutional similarities shaping legislators' behaviour across these systems, three key institutional differences also need to be considered for understanding the manner of representation practised by national parliamentarians in the two systems: (1) one important counterweight to national party government that exists in the Australian system rests in the review power of the upper house – the Senate. Due both to its proportional representation and wider party base, the Senate can and does exercise periodic checks the unbridled power of the central government. Summing the position up, one former House Committee Clerk states that "In Australia there is responsible party government in the House of Representatives and responsible parliamentary government in the senate." (Aldons, 2001:36). This differentiation allows the latter to play its review function in a powerful and independent manner (Mulgan, 1996); (2) a second key difference is that a federal system operates in Australia which means that there are alternative foci for voters to look to for policy expression. This additional tier of representation also works to dissect and dilute the power of the national party since state and federal representatives are carrying separate mandates. Of course the advent of devolution in the UK since 1997 can be argued to have worked to similar effect, although its more recent history means it may not inform political practice so strongly; (3) finally, there are the basic differences of geography and numbers of electors to be represented across the two countries. With a number

of Australian electorates spanning the size of some European countries and people widely dispersed across the boundaries, members clearly face a harder job to ensure they can meet with and hear from all their constituents – in short they face the ‘tyranny of distance’ in a way that UK representatives do not.

Within the boundaries of these institutional constraints, MPs in the UK and Australia of course still enjoy a relatively large degree of freedom to ‘write their own job description’, as this is commonly phrased by representatives, or ‘acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’, to use Pitkin’s classic definition, (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). The early empirical study of the topic in both countries was based largely around the distinction forged by Burke in 1774 between ‘trustee’ and ‘delegate’ – respectively linked with a ‘free mandate’ and an ‘imperative mandate’. Later, the third pole of the ‘politico’ was introduced as a mixed third type (Wahlke, Eulau, Buchanan, & Feguson, 1962), which proved empirically accurate in a range of countries. However, the tradition of the Burkean style trustee combined with the growth of party discipline, electoral imperatives and underpinned by ties to a local constituency has since created tensions between the personal, national, local and party motivations of MPs (Judge, 1998).

In Australia, we note a growing complexity, from the early days when the mixed ‘politicos’ tended to dominate (Emy, 1974; Halligan et al., 1988), to the expansion of the notion of ‘partisan’ – which has provided significant additional explanatory leverage in most systems outside the US (Norton and Wood, 1993). As the labels suggest, the partisans were seen as following the dictates of their party first in proposing and supporting legislation, as opposed to the ‘imperative mandate’ followed by the delegate or the ‘free mandate’ of conscience and the broader national interest adhered to by the trustee. Subsequent research on the relevance of this tripartite taxonomy in Australia Studlar and McAllister (1994, 1996) supported the notion that partisan role was the most clearly identified by members of the Federal parliament, with the delegate/local mandate next and free thinking trustees being a minority. Interestingly this greater party focus does not result in much alleviation of the working time devoted to constituency matters with MPs spending on average 19 hours on issues ‘back home’. This is followed by travel to the HoP, taking up 17 hours, and almost 16 hours for local community meetings (Studlar & McAllister, 1996, p. 77).

Attention has also recently been paid to the wider cultural forces shaping the mindset or outlook among representatives. Building on the work of Searing (1991, 1994) there has more recently been a move in the representational literature to re-formulate and supplement the traditional concepts of delegate, trustee, politico and partisan to produce a ‘thicker’ understanding that embodies a deeper notion of identity. While related to the delegate notion

such an understanding expands the simplistic mirroring of geographic and local interests to a richer cultural terrain including that of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In the Australian context Sawyer (2001) has pointed to the increasing relevance and acceptance of minority representatives within the Senate articulating the agenda of specific groups such as Aborigines, Asians, Gays, women, and young people. Particularly if they are few in number, ethnic MPs become national spokespersons for their minority group (Jewell, 2003) a finding confirmed by Zappalà (1998).

In part the UK debate mirrors that of Australian context. Traditional Burkean notions of trustee style representation became increasingly unfashionable in 20th century, with the rise of the mass electorate, disciplined politically parties and party government. As Judge comments:

no British MP in the 1990s would claim to act exclusively as a trustee, beholden only to his or her own conception of the national interest. Instead the modern reality of parliamentary politics is that MPs are primarily representatives of their party, increasingly attentive to their constituencies, as well as being receptive to the claims of organised interests within society (1999: 19)

The work of the 'study of parliament group' over the last decade underpins the importance of parties in shaping MPs behaviour, though research also indicates that MPs retain attachment to the ideas that personal opinions important in shaping their behaviour. In short, rather than taking uni-dimensional view of representation, MPs play different roles and act on occasions as both party delegate and trustee. Research on MPs increasingly highlighted number of long term trends which increase the potential for contradictions between MPs different roles. First, as in Australia, there has been a distinct growth of the constituency service role. Searing's (1994) seminal study of the role of Westminster MPs from the 1970s identified a significant group whose saw their primary focus in terms of the constituency, their role being essentially that of constituency welfare officer, sorting out the problems of individual constituents and/or being an advocate for the constituency as a whole, promoting it both economically and politically. Further research since 1980s has further highlighted the increasing demands made on MPs by constituents and constituency work (Norton & Wood, 1993; Norton, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Wood & Yoon, 1998). Second, whilst partisanship still predominates at Westminster, unlike Australia, there are growing tensions between MP and party. Research by Cowley, Norton and others has detected an increasing propensity amongst MPs to rebel against their own party over the past thirty years (Cowley & Stuart, 2004; Cowley, 2003). It is important to note that such rebellions are generally more embarrassing for parties than disastrous. Even so-called hard core rebels vote with their parties on the vast majority of occasions. Third, many commentators have pointed to the growth of policy advocates within parliament. Searing's work identified a significant group of MPs working on behalf of pressure groups, lobbyists, and promote policy or develop

specialist interests in policy areas, who aim to influence government policy at a micro level. Finally, whilst less systematic research has been done on identity representation in the UK context, there maybe recent indications that this influence is growing. Certainly, interest in the community role of MPs has recently increased following 9/11, about the representation of the sizeable Muslim *Ummah* in marginal constituencies.² Equally, following the significant increase in the number of woman MPs after the 1997 election, some research has noted that many of the recent intake of women Labour MPs were keen to define their own style of politics as different from the perceived macho atmosphere and traditions of Westminster (Childs, 2003).

2 New ICTs and the political process

In order to understand the role that new media technologies can play in the representative process we need to first identify their essential traits and differences from previous forms of communication. More than a decade ago, Abramson and his colleagues traced the essential traits of the new digital media for the political process (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988). These were basically fourfold, centering on the much greater quantities of information that can be transmitted; the faster speed and greater distance that this information can cover; the decentralised and individualised control over the production and consumption of information, and the interactive and many-to-many nature of the new communications channels that are opened up. To update this list following the evolution of new media over the last decade, we should also add the multi-media formats of the World Wide Web, which allows for the transmission of print, video and audio on the same communication channel. Interpreting these features in the context of representation, we see how new ICTs offer a range of new opportunities to MPs to improve their performance. First, making more information available to constituents is clearly a plus for representatives, assuming it is organised and relevant to their needs. Second, ICTs reduce the time required to gather and distribute information and the physical burden for constituents to access - which allows representatives to more efficiently conduct their role. Third, the decentralised control structure of the medium allows members to establish their own unedited 'voice' that can act as a more direct channel of communication to their constituents. Finally, the interactivity of the medium perhaps offers the most to enrich the representation process, as it allows for members to discuss and gather opinions, expertise and feedback from their constituents.

² Nicholas Watt, *Labour's love lost among the mosques of Luton*, The Guardian, Home Page, p. 10. August 10, 2004. Available online at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour/story/0,9061,1279571,00.html>. Roy Hattersley, *How to win back the Muslim vote*, The Guardian, Guardian Leader Pages, p. 14, August 23, 2004. Available online at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,9115,1288893,00.html>

Given these utilities one might expect that most, if not all parliamentarians would regard the new media as offering some type of assistance in carrying out their representational role. However, the argument proposed above about MPs roles, and the importance of resources, skills and incentive available to MPs form different personal and party backgrounds, as well as the different nature of the UK and Australian system, suggests that MPs might well avail new media opportunities to a different extent, and in different ways. As with other MPs' activities, we expect that the extent to which they use ICTs will be shaped by a combination of personal, constituency, party and institutional factors, and will depend upon the balance of resources, incentives and skills available to MPs in each of these areas. Below we outline these expectations from three main levels of analysis: the individual/personal; the organisational and political context level; and finally the structural or macro level.

Personal, organisational, and institutional predictors of website adoption

Personal factors

(1) Skills and attitudes. One obvious factor is the skills and background of MPs. Those with an interest or understanding of the technology are more likely to use the web. Hence, MPs with IT employment backgrounds or qualifications might be expected to be amongst the leaders or innovators in the technology. Additionally, MPs' staff can be crucial in pushing forward the use of ICTs since they are likely to run and manage e-mails and websites on a day-to-day basis.

(2) Socio-demographic characteristics may also be important as a predictor of online activity. The majority of survey evidence suggests that the young to middle-aged, middle-class, male is the heaviest political user of the net (Bimber, 2001; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2002; Norris, 2001). One might expect this to be reflected in Parliament with younger males of recent parliamentary cohorts likely to be the most active online. In fact, a study of the Australian Federal election of 2001 by Gibson and McAllister (2003) found that age was a significant factor predicting whether a candidate operated a personal website. On the other hand, it might well be that woman representatives might be persuaded to use the independence of personal websites to develop their own style of politics. Consistently, female candidates suffer from negative news reporting compared with men (Braden, 1996; Kahn, 1993, 1996). The internet, due to the control it offers to individuals and organisations in presentation and content of their message, therefore, might prove very attractive to female politicians as a means of retaining control of their words and image. The evidence for such argument is bolstered by the findings of Carlson (2003) who examined the 2003 Finnish elections and found gender to be insignificant both in whether or a candidate had a website and also how they used it. Greer and LaPointe's (2003) analysis of Senate and gubernatorial sites in 2000 and 1998 also pointed to a lack of

gender significance in web presence. Although far fewer sites were operated by women, this was due entirely to the lower number of female candidates. In the US, Gulati's study of representatives' websites found a significant gender difference in terms of the way that women legislators presented themselves online (Gulati, 2004).

(3) Parliamentary position - MPs online activity could also be defined by their particular job within the Parliament. One argument is that frontbenchers and members of the executive might have less incentives and less time to use the Internet. They can already refer the public to their own departmental websites for policy information. Furthermore, the culture of Ministerial jobs is still focused around the tradition of red boxes, paper documents and face-to-face meetings, rather than virtual communication. In the American context, Klotz pointed to the importance of incumbency, with senators seeking re-election emerging as less likely to have websites than challengers (1997). This inertia was thought to be due to the fact that as sitting politicians, these candidates were able to rely on their official government sites instead of establishing campaign-specific sites (D'Alessio 2000).

Constituency / electorate environment

(1) Marginality - Intuitively, one might suppose that MPs in marginal seats would be more likely to develop a website as a permanent communication tool for campaigning and raising their profile within the constituency giving them a longer term edge over their challengers. MPs in marginal constituencies arguably have a greater incentive to use any communication tools available to them to gain an advantage, no matter how small. The empirical evidence on this point has so far been mixed. Jackson claims in his study that marginality made no difference to MPs creating a web presence (Jackson, 2003). However, Ward and Gibson found that candidates/sitting MPs in marginal constituencies at the last election were indeed more likely to have a web presence (Ward & Gibson, 2003). In the US, Kamarck (2003) reported that by 2000 the gap between challengers and incumbents in producing websites had disappeared, at least for state-wide races, and competition had taken over as the driver. Finally, in their multivariate analysis of website production in the German federal election of 2002, Gibson and Römmele (2003) found that marginality in the election of 1998 did make a difference for candidates of the major parties, particularly those from the opposition CDU.

(2) Technological profile of the constituency - Where Internet use is higher within a constituency then it is not unreasonable to suppose that MPs will again have a greater incentive to develop Internet based forms of communication. The audience for any website should be higher and the pressure to communicate via e-mail from constituents is also likely to be greater. However, MPs might well make the calculation to adopt a website on the basis of their

constituency/electorate socio-demographic, economic and schooling profile, as this data is more readily available than internet penetration at any given time. Both, or a combination of both might therefore better explain adoption of the Internet.

Party environment

The party environment could also play a part in shaping MPs ICT strategies through a variety of formal and informal means. For instance, Klotz (1997) was one of the first to note the greater frequency of major party candidate sites in the 1996 US Senate election. Gibson and McAllister (2003) found that age and party were the only significant factors predicting whether a candidate operated a personal website at the last Australian Federal Election, in 2001. Findings about party affiliation – mainly left-wing – and the unimportance of campaign resources were interesting since they signalled that simply having the capacity for cyber-campaigning was not sufficient to stimulate candidates to engage in it. This points a number of intertwined party-related factors that can be empirically tested.

(1) *Party culture* - Whilst all the UK parties ideologically claim the net as their own (Ward, Gibson, & Nixon, 2003), peer pressure from within the party environment and encouragement from party elites can act as a stimulus to action. For example, the early and very strident techno-enthusiasm of Paddy Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrat leader arguably helped establish a culture of 'ownership' among activists at least, over the technology (Ward, Lusoli, & Gibson, 2003). Arguably those with a more educated and active membership might be more inclined to feel that they need to endorse and be seen as making good use of the new media capabilities. The symbolic value of embracing the new progressive technologies can be seen in Australia. The ALP leader Mark Latham experimented with direct e-democracy using his website as early as 2001, as a 'response to the failure of current parliamentary practice' (Bishop, Kane, & Patapan, 2002, p. 56).

(2) *Resources* - parties provide practical resources for their representatives through advice and cheap provision of web software e.g. website templates which make it easier for representatives to adopt the technology. For instance, Ward and Gibson's (2003) analysis of the UK general election found that the Liberal Democrats were most likely to operate sites and that their overall quality was better than that of the Labour or Conservative parties. Comparatively, interviews with members of both Houses suggest that direct party support is more common in the UK than in Australia, where MPs are left to their own devices to set up a web presence.

(3) *Party incentives* - it has been suggested that minor party representatives have more incentives to use ICTs to gain coverage that they are often denied by traditional media (Gibson & Ward, 2000a). Since the Net is unmediated, minor parties and their representatives are not at

the mercy of editors and ICTs can prove useful as means of communicating their message directly to the electorate. Certainly, analysis of state and regional party sites in Australia during 2001, and local candidate and party sites in the 2002 federal election in Germany underscored this point, with the Australian Greens and the centrist Free Democrats (FDP) maintaining or even outstripping their major left and right-wing counterparts in the extent of their presence (Gibson and Ward, 2003; Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2003). Following the same line of reasoning, therefore, independent MPs and MPs for parties out of government might be more likely to set up a web presence.

Systemic environment

As with the party environment, the institutional context and setting could influence MPs online behaviour. Some are common to both Houses. (1) Parliamentary culture - The history and norms of behaviour all set the general context for ICT usage. Previous adaptation and experiences of using new communications technologies can all help shape current perceptions of the benefits of investing in Internet communication. In general, as we noted above, the House of Commons partly because of its traditions and frameworks has been regarded as slow to adapt to new technological developments. (2) Formal resources - The informal norms and practices are also reflected in the formal resources available for MPs. This includes allowances to employ staff, equipment budgets and systems, and IT training, are all likely to have an impact on willingness to use new ICTs. Again, until recently, Westminster had a relatively poor reputation with regard to ICTs provision for MPs (Campbell, Harrop, & Thompson, 1999), while the Australian HoP enjoyed a relatively good reputation (Magarey, 1999). Finally, based on the understanding offered above of the different constraints operating in the UK and Australia, we can think of a number of incentives / obstacles shaping the capacity and willingness of representatives to adopt the new technology in the two countries:

- A. Party loyalty: The strong adherence to party among Australian lower house members one can argue would lower the incentive for innovation with new ICTs. The greater reliance on party for support and communication of message would suggest that they would not be so eager to build up constituency relationships through more individualised means of expression. The greater independence pursued by UK parliamentarians and continuing 'trustee' traits of UK members means that one might expect them to be more active in this regard.
- B. Constitutional federalism: Countering the effects of party in Australia, one can argue that its more decentralised system of representation offers more opportunities for innovation and experimentation that may diffuse throughout the system than in the UK. States may represent laboratories filtering up new practices and the more frequent

electoral opportunities offer a wider platform for candidates to experiment with the technology. Although the process of constitutional devolution offers the same opportunity in the UK, the new legislative assemblies of Scotland and Wales are just now beginning to establish political practice.

- C. Geographic scope: In addition to the greater diversity one might expect to see arising from the federal structure of Australian politics, the ‘tyranny of distance’ faced by many of the state and national representatives one would also expect to increase incentives to adopt the technology. Given the Internet’s ability to reduce time and space barriers it offers a useful solution to some of the problems faced in reaching geographically isolated communities.
- D. Cultural diversity – Finally, the recent trend in Australian politics toward more ‘identity’ or culturally based representation, as well the higher ethnic diversity of the electorate mean that representatives may be more keen to target certain constituent groups with their messages. The opportunities offered by the new technologies to reach particular segments of voters through special sections of websites and individualised news bulletins, as well as hear back from them via online consultations could prove particularly appealing, therefore.
- E. Clearly one final systemic source of variance to consider would also be the levels of Internet use and patterns of diffusion in the two countries. However, as table 1 reveals, the penetration rates have proved to be remarkably similar across the two countries.

[table 1 about here]

Even at a cursory glance, these factors suggest conflicting predictions about the extent of interest in using the new ICTs among representatives across the two systems. In general, however, if we view adoption from a socio-structural perspective, with the technology being seen as a means to solve existing problems, i.e. in a largely utilitarian manner, then we might expect to see higher levels of activity in Australia. Alternatively, if we assume a more expansive and technological determinist outlook to the technology among MPs, with adoption being driven on a more individualist-enthusiast basis, then we might expect to see more activity in the UK. The relatively higher degree of freedom enjoyed by MPs from party dictates, plus the lower ‘need’ based on the physical limitations of geography would show the British context to offer a more beneficial environment.

3 Research Questions

Our central research questions, therefore, are essentially three-fold, moving from the general and exploratory to more specific and explanatory:

- (Q1) How much activity takes place among UK and Australian MPs in terms of website establishment? How does it compare with State Assemblies, and quickly is the adoption process moving?
- (Q2) What are the basic functions of MPs websites and to what extent do these fulfil the representation role of MPs in the two different countries?
- (Q3) What factors / combination of factors best explain the patterns of adoption across the two systems: (a) individual level characteristics of MPs; (b) political organisational and electoral context dynamics; and (c) macro and institutional level traits?

3.1 Data and Methods

In order to investigate (Q1) we surveyed and tracked MPs websites for the UK House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, as well the Australian House of Representatives, and the Victorian and Queensland lower chambers. A range of official and non-official sources were used to detect MPs' websites addresses (Unique Resource Locators: URLs) during November and December 2003. The UK and Australian assemblies' websites were used as authoritative sources of information on MPs URLs. Additional sources were used to verify the accuracy and completeness of the parliamentary database. In addition, we consulted political parties' websites and main media websites and resorted to a Google search for 'Name Surname, MP' for missing or ambiguous results. To examine (Q2) and (Q3) we focused on national legislative members only (i.e. UK House of Commons members and Australian Federal Representatives). The URLs collected for the HoC and the HoP were screened for invalid sites, such as broken links, 'dead sites' dating back to the 2001 election and not updated since, and Epolitix.com micro-sites in the UK.³ In January 2004 valid sites were analysed for features and content using a coding scheme developed by the authors, based on previous work by Gibson and Ward on election candidates' websites (Ward & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Ward, 2000b). The scheme includes coding items for information, engagement, presentation and links provided by the MPs on their websites. For (Q3) we collected a range of individual level data on MPs as well as constituency level characteristics: MPs age, gender,

³ Epolitix.com provides a free hosting service, whereby MPs' can publish and update a few web pages using a micro-site template provided by the host. At the time of the survey, these sites were small and quite standard, though they have been revamped in February 2004 to allow MPs to publish more extensive information and a range of features, including constituency online consultations (<http://www.epolitix.com>).

government position, educational background and use of ICTs; electorate marginality, Internet penetration, and socio-demographic profile. Below we set out our expectations based on the three levels of explanation and in the sections that follow lay out the empirical findings relating to each. Finally, we explore the implications of the findings for the representatives' role in each of the two systems.

3.2 Results

Overall adoption rates

In terms of sheer visibility of MPs in cyberspace, we found similar results in the UK and Australia, with some interesting exceptions (Table 2). MPs in the both National Houses seem to be equally likely to set up a website, slightly above 50 %. State assemblies' MPs are relatively less likely than their national peers to set up websites – between 38 % and 44 % can be linked to an existing URL. The notable exception here is Queensland, where only 11 % of the MPs have a personal website. As compared with State Assemblies, national Parliaments therefore seem to have an edge in the number of MPs who set up a personal website. In terms of growth from the past, again the UK and Australia show similar traits. In the UK, the level of MPs activity online has expanded considerably over the last 18 months from a starting point of around 30 % in early 2003, i.e. by more than 50% (Jackson, 2003). In Australia, according to figures produced by Chen (2002) the increase is of a similar proportion (40 %) across a slightly longer time period, with 35 % of Commonwealth MPs and Senators reported as maintaining a personal website with political information at the time of his enquiry (early 2002).⁴

[tables 2 and 3 about here]

Looking more closely at the Hoc and HoP some differences emerge as to the types of sites built by MPs (Table 3). First, when we take into account only valid sites, Australian MPs are slightly more likely than HoC MPs to have a website (47 % vis-à-vis 42 %) In fact, twice as many UK URLs turn out to be invalid than in Australia. The main problems were broken links, sites not being updated for a year or more or still under construction. Australian MPs, therefore, when they do decide to set up a site appear to be more rigorous in their approach. However, UK MPs may still enjoy greater visibility on the internet with their sites continuing to be sampled by search engines or online directories well after their 'sell-by' date. Finally, we note an interesting difference as regards the type of valid sites. While in the Australia virtually all valid website are individual MPs sites, in the UK a significant proportion of MPs adopt their party template to build their online presence (17 %), and some share a website with the local branch of the party

⁴ Two considerations suggest caution with comparisons. First, Chen's report draws on self-reported behaviour of a sample of legislators – 20 % response rate for Commonwealth reps. Second, 'legislators' here includes members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

(4 %). This runs contrary to our expectations about the impact of the stronger party discipline operating in Australia. We would have expected to find a closer link between party and MP in the Australian context, rather than in the UK context. It is also of note that all template sites in the UK are those of Labour MPs (constituting 29 % of their total sites), Labour being the party that most has stressed the importance for MPs to be ‘on message’. Thus, overall we do not see huge differences between the two countries in terms of the adoption rates, indicating that our institutional or systemic factors may not be terribly influential in driving the pace or overall scope of use of the new technologies.

[table 4 about here]

After profiling overall levels of activity, we looked at the functions of MPs websites; specifically, we coded for a range of information and engagement features, and for the linking practice on the sites (Table 4). In terms of information provision, results show a few interesting differences between MPs in the two countries. First, the MPs biography and contact details for the MP were equally likely to be present – all in excess of 95 % of all sites. Second, information about the constituency / electorate was much more common on Australian (93 %) than on UK sites (58 %). Conversely, MPs surgery information is much less common in Australia (7 %) than in the UK (71 %). Thirdly specialised information aimed at the media – press releases, local and national news, and speeches - are much more likely to be found in Australia than in the UK, with average differences in excess of 15 %. In terms of news, Australian MPs also provide more local news (25 %) than UK MPs (10 %). Finally, UK MPs were more likely to place their diary online, and to respond to FAQs using the site than their Australian colleagues. In summary, results for information items suggest that Australian MPs websites are more broadly oriented both towards the electorate and the media, addressing large numbers of people at once. UK MPs websites seem to be directed more ‘individually’ to the elector, the constituent, and the politically interested. Underscoring this is the finding that five UK representatives are currently engaged in blogging, while there are none in Australia.⁵

Site Content

We then moved to consider engagement features which allow the user to talk-back or interact with the MP. For all MPs the *engagement* items score much lower than *information* items. In general email contact from the site is now ubiquitous, though with some differences between UK and Australia. Notably, the most sophisticated and potentially more interactive possibilities offered by new media are neglected – e-campaigning, discussion fora and online

⁵ The weblog of Tom Watson, MP, the first blogging representative <http://www.tom-watson.co.uk> has attracted wide media attention, and had prompted a number of colleagues to follow on his steps.

surgeries. On the other hand, technically simple mechanisms such as email newsletters, polls and online recruitment are relatively more widespread. Again, we found differences between the two systems worth noting. While Australian MPs seem to favour a more personal, one-to-one style of engagement – contact by email, and online polls – UK MPs seem to be doing slightly more of the many-to-many capabilities of the medium, especially e-newsletters and discussion boards. In addition UK MPs appear to be engaging in more online consultation forums (such as surgeries) than in Australia, a finding that clearly runs contrary to our expectations driven by the tyranny of distance. One final difference regarding the distribution of interactive features across the two countries is that resource generation features more heavily on UK MPs sites, with more invitations issued to join / donate to their party. The UK figures, however, are boosted by the Labour MPs use of the ‘Web-in-a-Box’ template facility which provides a standard menu bar with these options available.

Turning to hyper-linking practice, this appears to follow a very similar pattern in terms of intra-party linkage across the two countries, with links to national parties topping the list at a frequency of circa 90 % and links to local sites in the constituency / electorate also being very frequent. Externally, links to the Federal parliament and HoC are also very common, at about 70 % of the site; links to media and pressure groups are much less common, at around 40 %. Two interesting differences do emerge, however, with Australian MPs linking twice as much to government departments being twice as frequent in Australia than in the UK (84 % compared to 44 %). This might depend on the higher proportion of Australian MPs involved in government, given the sheer number difference in this respect. Secondly, Australian MPs are also slightly more likely to link to their MP colleagues, especially of different parties, than UK MPs. Again this finding frustrates our expectations of the more party-centric behaviour of Australian MPs. Instead we find them to exhibit greater collegiality and cross-party ties.

[table 5 about here]

Overall, the variability among sites was higher in the British context, with MP sites displaying a greater range in the amount of information and engagement opportunities provided. Australian MPs on the other hand offered a more consistent and widespread repertoire of services. This perhaps came from their seeing their sites as the ‘portal to government’ for citizens as both Federal and State MPs have remarked in the course of interviews.⁶ This more variable quality might help explain the move of the British Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats to provide support and templates for their MPs to use. This is less than a necessity in

⁶ As a part of a wider research project (<http://www.ipop.org.uk>), we have conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with more than 60 MPs in six Assemblies.

the Australian setting, as MPs tend to have neater, more professional and more frequently updates websites (Table 5).

Explanatory factors

After profiling the extent of use of the WWW and related technologies as well as the typical use that is made of them, we turn to examine the combination of factors that can help explain why an MP develops website in each of these countries. To do this we look at personal or individual level variables, factors particular to the party and electoral environment, and finally systemic factors. In terms of personal factors, we have available data on gender, age, Internet familiarity (sub-sample),⁷ front- and backbench position, and parliamentary seniority

[table 6 about here]

Individual factors Table 6 shows us that shows that youth and Internet familiarity are important in both the UK and in Australia in determining whether an MP goes online. While gender appears to have no effect in the UK (with both 42 % of both male and female MPs having websites) in Australian there is a slight bias male MPs, (49 %) compared to female representatives (42%). Both countries also appear to favour resources-rich frontbenchers, rather than the time-rich backbenchers, since having a ministerial position seems to increase the chances of MPs having a website. More interestingly, however, is that length of MPs service seems to have an opposite effect in the two systems with recent UK MPs being significantly more likely to have a website and longer-serving MPs appearing to be quicker off the blocks.

Electoral/Political context In terms of political organisational and electoral context dynamics, we considered the impact of electoral marginality, electorate Internet penetration and MPs political party as influences on the likelihood of an MP developing a website. The findings on marginality are some of the most striking with a clear difference emerging between the two countries, as shown in table 7.

[table 7 about here]

In the UK, representatives for marginal constituencies are more likely to have websites than representatives for safe constituencies. On the contrary, MPs for safe electorates are more likely to have a website in Australia. This is perhaps related to the existence of compulsory voting which removes the additional burden faced by British MPs to focus on mobilising voters to turnout and instead focus just on conversation. In terms of internet penetration, despite there being little variance at the national level in terms of Internet use (as shown in table 1) there is

⁷ In Australia, Internet familiarity is measured by frequency of Internet use (five points scale) during the last election for information / news (ACS, Q B8); in the UK, it is measured by frequency of Internet use (four points scale) for information and news (BRS, Q65). Both scales have been collapsed in three point scales: high, medium, low, to make them comparable and correct for the small Australian sample.

variance across electoral districts in each country. While it appears that higher levels of use do appear to make some difference for UK MPs, overall the evidence is not overwhelming that MPs are driven by the potential size of their ‘audience’ in taking to the Web. Finally, it does appear that party matters since while the legislators from the main parties in both countries conform to average probabilities for setting up a website, regardless of position in government, MPs for significant third parties – such as the Nationals in Australia and the Liberal Democrats in the UK – have a much higher than average probability of doing so. Independent candidates have an above-average probability of having a website, especially so in Australia.⁸

Institutional/Systemic factors

Lastly we move to more speculative ground about the importance of the broader systemic and parliamentary institutional factors in determining MPs website establishment. Clearly the rather even levels of adoption rate across the two countries suggests that it is the fore-going individual and meso-level variables that are most important for understanding the enthusiasm observed among MPs in adopting the new technologies. Certainly the lack of any ‘responsible parties’ effect appears to stand out, with UK MPs operating more standardised and ‘template’ sites than their Australian counterparts. A more rigorous test of the notion that a system with higher party discipline would dissuade website establishment was conducted by examining the Web activities of known rebels.⁹ In the UK, however, only one in five of the top rebels between 2001 and 2003 have a valid website, a significantly lower figure than the ratio for average MPs. For the cohort entering the HoC in 2001 we found no significant correlation between rebellion and website presence, regardless of party affiliation. In Australia Alby Schultz (LP, NSW), the only recorded rebel since the 2001 election - who actually abstained from two Telstra votes – has no recorded website. It would not seem to be the case, therefore, that the medium is attractive as a means for dissent.

[table 8 bout here]

In terms of the effects of federalism, again the similar rates of adoption indicate that the wider electoral platform that this more decentralised system creates does not necessarily encourage technological innovation. Overall, however, there were differences in the two countries at the regional and state level which indicate some aggregate effects below the national level that should be further investigated. As table 8 reveals, while MPs from the Eastern states NSW, ACT, Victoria and Queensland display quite average rates of adoption,

⁸ Though small numbers here suggest caution with the interpretation.

⁹ We use here data for governing party only, as dissent is best formulated theoretically as voting against the Government (Cowley & Stuart, 2004). Several sources are available on MPs rebellions in the UK; Phil Cowley provides an excellent overview at <http://www.revolts.co.uk>. In Australia, virtually no rebellions were registered since 2001 (Bennett, 2004).

those from Tasmania and the Northern Territory are much keener, while legislators from WA are much less inclined to set up a virtual presence.

While the greater enthusiasm among MPs from the NT and Tasmania do suggest the tyranny of distance argument has merit, the WA results challenge the simplicity of this interpretation. Closer observation of the size of the electorate in square kilometres and the likelihood of the MP having a site - on either end of the distribution i.e. those with very small inner urban electorates vs. very large, mainly rural (but sometimes provincial) electorates – revealed no significant effects. Interestingly, regional-national differences emerge on party lines in the UK, with the Scottish National Party MPs displaying far higher commitment to the Web than those from Plaid Cymru (Wales) and any of the parties in Northern Ireland – definitely lagging behind. We will need data on additional, national and regional assemblies which we are currently collecting, to increase both N and hopefully variance. Electoral geography, therefore, does appear to matter in both nations, but in a way that requires more investigation to unravel.

Conclusions

Overall, these results have revealed a picture of significant levels of parliamentary Web activity across these two countries, with around half of MPs in Australia and the UK having established a personal presence. While such parity is notable it also suggests that Internet use by MPs is driven more by internal party organisational, and political contextual variables, as well as individual traits, than by any broader national systemic factors. In particular, adoption by UK MPs seem to be more influenced by electoral dynamics than is the case in Australia, with younger and less secure newcomers tending to use the Web more frequently than their older and safer counterparts.¹⁰ A more marked difference, however, was found between the two countries in regard to the contents and the function of the sites. While neither group of MPs offered up highly interactive sites, UK MPs tended toward a more consultative approach and a focus on their constituents views. Australian MPs took a wider approach, seeing their sites as more of a resource and information gathering tool. Given the evidence provided earlier from McAllister and Studlar (1996) that Australian MPs are certainly not neglectful of constituency matters, then such findings suggest that perhaps there is a greater reluctance to forgo the rough and tumble of real world or face-to-face politics for its virtual form.¹¹

Finally, it is difficult to translate these results in univocal conclusion on the roles of MPs in UK and Australia – trustee, delegate, politico and partisan. We have an indication that UK parties

¹⁰ Interviews in both countries also suggest that UK MPs value the Web more as a campaigning tool, whereas Australian MP value most e-mailing lists and database technology.

¹¹ Again, more than 30 interviews with MPs in the Australian House of Reps and state legislatures strongly suggest that this is the case.

have a better integrated 'online strategy' to make sure their MPs toe the party cyber-line – at least in terms of design and information. However, we noted how this might be a response to the need to put order in a somewhat more chaotic UK cyber-frontier. In Australia, party perhaps take a less conspicuous role, trusting MPs will however conform and not step out of line – either online or offline. Results for the content of sites are also mixed. Although visibility and contact details are equally widespread, we found that Australian sites are more aimed at the media, updated more frequently, and on average contain more 'broad' range information. They also link more consistently to institutional sites, government sites and their colleagues. In short, Australian MPs seem to be using the Internet to fulfil the 'politico' role described above better than their UK colleagues. Conversely, albeit a minority of UK legislators seem to be providing a more personal, individual service to the constituent via electronic means – discussion boards, e-newsletters, and recently also e-mail consultation and blogging. Although firm conclusion cannot be established, this suggests that less experienced, younger and IT literate UK MPs are using the site to open up channels with constituents, thus trying to enhance their 'trustee' status electronically.

Finally, our findings point to the importance of further in-depth research with the MPs themselves to begin to understand their motivations in designing their sites and view of audience needs. This work is currently underway and will hopefully help provide some answers to why such differences are observed.

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Table 1. Adult Internet access in UK and Australia as a percentage of the total population

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
UK	45	52	58	62	62
Australia	46	54	58	59	63

NOTES:

UK figures are based on ONS Omnibus survey, UK adults. Results are yearly averages.

Australian figures are based on yearly data ABS Household Use of Information Technology, Australian adults, until 2002. Later figures are from Nielsen / Netrating (14 YO+)

All figures for 2004 are estimates, based on first two quarters only.

Table 2. URLs found for UK and Australian Assemblies

	Number of MPs	Total URLs	MPs with an URL (%)
UK House of Commons	659	341	51
Scottish Parliament	129	48	38
National Assembly for Wales	50	22	44
Australian House of Representatives	150	79	52
Victoria Assembly	88	40	44
Queensland Assembly	89	10	11

Table 3. MPs website types

		UK		Australia	
		URL %	n	URL %	n
Valid	Individual site	63	215	87	69
	Template party	14	47	2.5	2
	Shared with local party	3	10		
	Template other	.	3		
	Shared with other representative	.	3		
Total valid URLs		80	278	89.5	71
Invalid	Broken link	6.5	22	4	3
	Not a proper site	5.5	16	5	4
	Not updated for over a year	4.5	15	1.5	1
	Under construction	3.5	10		
Total invalid URLs		20	63	10.5	8
Total URLs		100 %	341	100 %	79
% MPs with a valid site on all MPs		42 %		47 %	

Table 4. Information, engagement and linkage features on MPs websites

		<i>% of UK sites</i>	<i>% of Australian sites</i>
<i>Information</i>	Contact details	98	99
	MP biography	96	97
	Local and national news	80	93
	MP surgery information	71	7
	Press releases	64	84
	Information on HoC work	60	81
	Constituency / regional information	58	93
	Information on issues / campaigns	45	45
	Result at last General Election	26	17
	Online MP diary	14	1
	Frequently asked questions	13	4
<i>Engagement</i>	E-mail contact	88	97
	E-mail newsletter sign-on	33	19
	Online recruitment, join, donate	30	9
	Online surveys / polls	16	39
	Online surgery	7	1
	Discussion board / chat room	6	
	E-campaigning	5	7
<i>Links</i>	Links to party	91	87
	Links to constituency sites	77	72
	Links to the HoC	73	70
	Links to govt departments	44	84
	Links to the media	40	36
	Links to pressure groups	34	36
	Links to other MPs	24	32
		N = 278	N = 71

Table 5. Frequency of website update

	Australian sites (%)	UK sites (%)
6-12 months	4	8
2-6 months	17	10
Monthly	6	14
Forthnightly	13	22
Weekly	29	23
1-3 days	26	10
No way to tell	4	13
Total	100	100

Table 6. Personal factors and website adoption

		UK		Australia	
		MPs with sites	Difference from average	MPs with sites	Difference from average
Gender	Female	42%	-	42 %	- 5 %
	Male	42%	-	49 %	+ 2 %
Age (years)		53	- 2 years	52	- 2 years
Internet familiarity	Low	37 %	- 5 %	29 %	- 18 %
	Medium	55 %	+ 13 %	45 %	- 2 %
	High	59 %	+ 17 %	50 %	+ 3 %
Ministerial position		48 %	+ 6 %	52 %	+ 5 %
Seniority (years)		9.5	- 1.5 years	8.5	- 0.5 years

Table 7. Electorate factors and website adoption

	UK		Australia	
	MPs with sites	Difference from average	MPs with sites	Difference from average
Majority	11.7 %	- 1.3 %	10.1 %	+ 0.8 %
Internet penetration	33.1 5	+ 2 %	37.2 %	+ 0.8 %

NOTES:

a. Internet penetration is calculated for British constituencies only.

b. Majority (or marginality) is calculated as winning margin on total electorate population. In Australia, this is calculated for the winning party after second preference votes are added, i.e. as the winning margin on total electorate population minus 50 %

c. Internet penetration in Australia is based on census data, and indicates individual access to the Internet in the week before the census night. In the UK, it is based on Experian data for 2001, and indicates 'individual in household' access over the last week.

Table 8. Parties and website adoption

		MPs with websites (%)	Difference from average (%)
UK	Labour	40	- 2
	Conservatives	44	+ 2
	Liberal Democrats	67	+ 25
	Plaid Cymru	25	- 17
	SNP	60	+ 18
	Northern Ireland parties	11	- 31
	Independent	50	+ 8
Australia	Liberal	43	- 4
	ALP	45	- 2
	Nationals	69	+ 22
	Other	75	+ 28
	NSW	52	+ 5
	ACT	50	+ 3
	VIC	46	- 1
	QLD	44	- 3
	SA	58	+ 11
	WA	13	- 37
	TS	80	+ 33
	NT	100	+ 53