

**“From Weird to Wired”: MPs, the Internet and
Representative Politics in the UK**

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Introduction

The apparently ever decreasing levels of trust in UK politicians and engagement with representative institutions has led to an increased interest in the potential of new information communication technologies (ICTs) to re-engage the public and help redefine representative politics more generally. Whilst there has been considerable speculation about the democratic potential of ICTs, journalistic accounts of political web use provide a depressing picture for techno-optimists. It is commonly perceived that few politicians are Internet savvy and one commentator even accused MPs of Internet autism.¹ The lack of adaptation to new ICTs has been seen as yet another symptom of the irrelevance of MPs and the Westminster Parliament. However, there have been relatively few comprehensive studies of the online activities of Westminster MPs to accurately confirm this picture.² This paper, therefore, seeks to address some of these issues in the context of the broader long-term changes of the role of MPs. It assesses how far the Internet and other technologies might either accelerate existing trends, such as the increasing constituency service role, or might facilitate a new style of politics based on a more interactive, personal and individualised form of representation. In particular, we examine the extent and nature of Internet use by Westminster MPs and whether this favours changes in their relations with their constituents, party and parliament. We also analyse the factors which drive MPs to create and develop a web presence. By way of conclusion, the paper reflects back on the wider consequences for representative parliamentary politics.

Roles, Relationships and Representation: MPs and Representative Politics

In order to understand if, and how, ICTs might facilitate change in the roles and behaviour of MPs, we need first to understand the changes in the broader context of the roles, relations and behaviour of Westminster MPs. The combination of the ethos of the traditional Burkean style trustee combined with the growth of party discipline and underpinned by ties to a local constituency has always created tensions between the personal, national, local and party motivations of MPs (Judge, 1999). However, repeated studies of the role, behaviour and attitudes of MPs since the 1970s have identified a number of long-term shifts in their behaviour outlined below:

- The growth of the constituency service role - Searing's (1994) seminal study of the role of Westminster MPs identified a significant group whose saw their primary focus in terms of the constituency. Their role was 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. Subsequent studies of MPs work have nearly all suggested a significant increase in this constituency work: MPs receive more mail from constituents, report an ever increasing amount of constituency casework and are spending more time in their constituencies than ever before (Norton and Wood, 1993; Norton, 1994; Wood and Yoon, 1998). Norton (1994; 1997) argues that the reasons for the increased constituency focus are threefold: Firstly, MPs are motivated to play this role partly because of increased electoral volatility since the 1960s which means that even seats which would once be regarded as safe are no longer necessarily so. Hence, there is still a belief that being seen as a good constituency MP may make a difference to the chances of re-election. Secondly, the growth of the state agencies means there has been corresponding rise in the amount of state-citizen dealings and often increasing levels of dissatisfaction with such services; thirdly, rising expectations from the public concerning MPs work has created extra burdens for MPs. In short, the more the MP perform the constituency role, the more publicity it receives and the more the public comes to expect it.

¹ David Walker "The General Election of 2001 is not going to be held online", Business 2.0, May 2001

² The only published UK study of MPs sites and their use of email is Jackson (2003).

- The growth of policy advocates - Searing's work suggested that policy advocates, who aim to influence government policy, represented the largest grouping within parliament. Included in this category were several sub-types: ideologues - whose aim is to contribute new ideas; generalists - whose primary concern is with scrutinising legislation and the executive; policy specialists – concentrating on influencing small localised, specialised fields. Searing's research suggested that the policy specialist role in particular had been strengthened over the last 20 years with MPs working on behalf of pressure groups, lobbyists, and promoting policy or developing specialist interests in policy areas. The emergence of Select Committees tracking government departments has provided opportunities for some MPs to develop their parliamentary policy specialisms still further. It might be argued that this is a rational response to the diminishing role of the national legislature. As executive power has grown and many broad policy debates have moved away from the Westminster arena to supranational institutions, then one response of MPs has been to develop expertise in narrower areas of low politics.
- Increasing tensions between MP and party – (1) Parliamentary party - whilst in a strongly centralised party system like the UK, MPs have sometimes been viewed as lobby fodder for their parties in parliament, the ongoing research of Cowley and Norton has detected an increasing propensity amongst MPs to rebel against their own party. Even the current Labour administration, whose backbenchers were often accused of being on-message automatons, slavishly loyal to the leadership, have shown increasing desire to rebel on a wide range of issues (Cowley, 2003; Cowley and Stuart, 2004). Whilst one could view this as symptomatic of increasingly independent minded representatives, it could equally be a reflection of the frustration and powerlessness that some backbenchers feel especially where governments have large majorities. Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that despite this increased propensity to rebel, the consequences for governments are more embarrassing than catastrophic. Governments at Westminster still rarely face defeat as result of backbench rebellions. (2) Constituency party – Since the 1960s local parties have been thought to become more demanding of their MP. In some areas local parties extended their formal control over parliamentary candidates. Labour Party rule changes in the 1980s which allowed local parties not only to select candidates but deselect sitting MPs raised the prospect of local party delegates. In fact, deselection of sitting MPs is rare but the informal threat means that MPs are inclined at least to take note of local party activists.
- The growth of professionalism - Underlying many of the changes discussed is a general trend towards the professionalisation of politics (King 1981; Riddell, 1993, 1995; Paxman 2003). One aspect of professionalisation has been the growth of the so-called career politician who devotes their whole lives to party politics. Studies of the background of MPs indicate an increasing number who have worked for the party prior to coming to Westminster, and many who have done little else in their lives bar working for a party. Alongside this rise of the career politician, is the corresponding decline in the notion of the part-time MP with outside interests and who hold down other jobs (Rush and Giddins, 2001). MPs are, therefore, often spending more hours solely devoted to their work in Westminster and in their constituencies.

In some ways, the trends outlined above appear to point towards increased individualism. Yet, party loyalties and career professionalism still tend in reality to reduce the scope for independence. Moreover, despite this increased professionalism, constituency service and willingness to express dissenting opinions, public perceptions of parliamentary representation or of politicians collectively has not noticeably improved. Whilst it doubtful that politicians

were ever revered, survey evidence from the 1970s onwards suggests that public knowledge, interest and trust of MPs as a collective body has currently fallen to its lowest ever levels (Hansard Society/Electoral Commission, 2004). Interestingly, though, the public often distinguish between their own individual MP - generally viewed more favourably – and the more abstract concept of politicians as a group or, the institutions of parliamentary representation. Nevertheless, in view of this lack of engagement, it has become increasingly popular for journalists, academics and politicians themselves to suggest that the era of traditional representative politics is over. Increasingly, critics argue that the public are demanding more direct inputs into policy, on a more regular basis, in ways that may bypass traditional representative institutions such as parties, MPs and parliaments.³

MPs and the Potential of the Internet

It is not surprising, therefore, that against this gloomy backdrop of public disengagement with representative parliamentary politics, that the growth of Internet and other ICTs have been seized upon as a means of promoting change within the system of representative parliamentary politics. At the individual MP level, there is potential for ICTs to facilitate changes in three areas:

- **Constituency-MP relations** - At a one level, technologies can be used to improve the efficiency and professionalism of the constituency-MP relationship. This is likely to be simply a modernisation of the things that MPs have traditionally done through the use of new technologies. Hence, MPs can use e-mail to communicate more quickly, regularly and more cheaply with their constituents than letters. Much more information can be made available via a website about an MP's background interests, activities and how to get in touch (Campbell et al, 1999). More innovatively though, MPs could use the technologies to build more interactive, relationships with their constituents creating a new style of more personalised and accessible politics. This might mean use new ICTs for consultative purposes through e-forums or e-surveys, allowing constituents to interact with the MP through e-surgeries (Coleman, 2001), or developing a regular two-way dialogue with citizens through chat rooms, bulletin boards or weblogs.
- **Party-MP relations** - One could suggest also that new ICTs also offer the potential to shift the balance of the relations between party and representative, possibly even increasing the tensions between MP and their party. On the one hand, the independent adoption of websites by MPs provides a potentially greater platform for individualism, networking and even dissent. Websites theoretically allow MPs to communicate more frequently, in more depth, and to a wider, (even global), audience. Moreover, because of the unmediated nature of the Internet, national party elites may find it increasingly difficult to monitor and control such communication flows (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Ward and Gibson, 2003). Arguably, therefore, it is easier to challenge the party line and then to network online with other like-minded dissenters. Alternatively, however, parties recognising this potential for individuality can seek to regulate informally the use of the net through party templates and guidelines which aim to produce a branded consistent party message to voters through all party representative websites (Jackson, 2003).
- **Policy and Issue campaigning** - New ICTs further provide opportunities to develop the policy role of MPs and in particular offer increased capabilities to campaign around

³ See, for example, Peter Mandelson "It maybe that the era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end..." *The Guardian* 16 March, 1998, p.14

selected issues. Again, at one level, this might simply mean MPs providing information on issues and highlighting their own parliamentary role with regard to selected issues. At a more advanced level, MPs could develop their own online campaigns by gathering evidence and opinion online, engaging expert opinion through e-consultation, encouraging the public to support campaigns either through joining organisations online, signing e-petitions and lobbying other organisations online.

The possibilities in these areas highlight three divergent scenarios for ICT facilitated representative politics: (1) Modernisation - where the technologies are used simply to update, make more efficient the existing services and roles of MPs and possibly to improve the image of MPs and parliaments generally. This involves limited participative opportunities but is focussed around a more consumer style of democracy (Bellamy and Raab, 2000); (2) Reinvigoration - rather than simply modernising existing practices, ICTs can be used to provide additional opportunities for public participation which in turn might help to re-engage public interest and trust and reconnect MPs with the electorate. Whilst this may involve direct democracy techniques, the process is more focused on deliberation and MPs, parties and the like can still play key mediating and agenda setting roles (Coleman, 1999; Budge, 1996); (3) Erosion - Some have argued that if MPs and representative institutions fail to respond to new technologies, then one may see an increasing erosion of their traditional functions as executives and political elites use electronic channels to strengthen a more direct relationship between themselves and their citizens thus bypassing elected legislatures and representatives. As government offers more consultation, polls, referenda online some might ask why citizens would bother with the middleman (Coleman, 1999; Morris, 2000; Bellamy and Raab, 1999, 2004; Frissen, 2003).

Westminster Online - Empirical Research

Although there has been much theoretical speculation about the potential of ICTs, empirical research on MPs use of Internet technologies has been patchy. Whilst there has been regular journalistic criticism of the poor quality of MPs online performance, systematic academic study has been more restricted.⁴ The general assumption seems to be that there is limited activity online and where it exists, it is of very little significance.

It is commonly accepted that growth of MPs' websites has been very slow, although it is difficult to establish accurate records because of the lack of centralised and comprehensive lists of websites. Various reports suggest that the number of sites has grown from around 7% in 1997 to 16% (2000) and possibly up to 20-30% by 2002 (Perrone, 2001; Uhm and Hague, 2001; Jackson, 2003). Besides this relatively leisurely uptake of the technology by MPs, there has been consistent criticism of the content of MPs websites as being one-dimensional, lacking in any kind of innovation, poorly designed and often outdated or not working. In the main, MPs sites have, at best, been seen as one-directional information sources, at worst simply unprofessional cyber-brochures where MPs simply try to do the things they've always done (Jackson, 2003). *The Economist* encapsulated this view when it commented: "the typical British MP - if he or she has a site at all - offers an out of date curriculum vitae and a recycled harangue from the hustings".

The suggested reasons for this limited performance have centred on the lack of the resources and incentives to use the technology creatively. MPs often complain about the relatively poor

⁴ See for example, David Walker, "MPs Off Message on Internet Revolution", *The Guardian*, January 11, 2001, or Matthew Tempest, "MPs find it's a Tangled Web", *The Guardian*, 31 October 2001.

facilities offered by Westminster including the low level of allowances available to manage new technology developments and the poor quality of computer provision. Whilst the volume of e-mail communication has increased significantly, some MPs are worried about their ability to deal with the ever increasing amounts of mail and the raised expectations it creates (Allen, 2001). For some, therefore, e-mail is seen as burden rather than a benefit. Others have suggested that MPs have calculated that there are few electoral benefits from running a site. In short, there are no votes to be won in cyberspace and consequently, it is not worth investing their scarce time and money (Steinberg, 2000; Ward and Gibson, 2003).

In comparative terms, Westminster has a poor reputation, particularly in relation to the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, (Smith and Gray, 1999; Coleman, 2001), In reality, Westminster may actually be less of a laggard than first appears. Outside the US and legislators have generally been slow to develop a web presence thus figures of 30% MPs online are comparable with many other systems (Hoff, 2003; Zittel, 2004). Indeed, in some areas Westminster has actually pioneered the use of ICTs notably in terms of a number of legislative e-consultation exercises. Several parliamentary committees have used online methods to engage the public in policy debate with some limited success (Coleman, 2002).

Assessing MPs Online: A Framework for Analysis

As with other forms of MPs' behaviour, we expect that the extent to which they use ICTs is likely to be shaped by combination of personal, constituency, party and parliamentary factors. The extent to which MPs use Internet technologies will therefore depend on the balance of resources, incentives and skills available to the MP in each of these areas.

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. Traditionally, however, few MPs have entered Westminster with this sort of technical or scientific employment background. It need not necessarily be the MPs themselves that are central in this respect. An 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 in many instances. (2) Socio-demographic characteristics may also be important as a predictor of online activity. The majority of survey evidence suggest that the young to middle-aged, middle-class, male is the heaviest political user of the net (Bimber, 2001; Norris; 2001; Gibson et al, 2002). Younger generations, in particular, are likely to be the most IT literate having been educated and socialised in ICT usage. Hence, one might expect this to be reflected in Parliament with younger males of recent parliamentary cohorts likely to be the most active online. One possible caveat to this pattern is that woman representatives might be persuaded to use the independence of personal websites to develop their own style of politics. Childs (2004) notes 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. Consequently, cyberspace might offer a new unmediated space in which to do this. More specifically, in the US, Gulati's (2004) study of representatives' websites found significant gender difference in terms of the way that women legislators presented themselves online. (3) Besides personal interest and social characteristics, MPs online activity could also be defined by their particular job within the House of Commons. 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 focussed

around the tradition of red boxes, paper documents and face-to-face meetings, rather than virtual communication.

Constituency environment - The push for ICT usage from the constituency environment comes from two sets of factors: (1) Marginality - Intuitively, one might suppose that those in marginal constituencies 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 (2003) claims in his study that marginality made no difference to MPs creating a web presence. However, Ward and Gibson (2003) found that candidates/sitting MPs in marginal constituencies at the last election were indeed more likely to have a web presence. (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.

Party environment - The party environment could also play a part in shaping MPs ICT strategies through a variety of formal and informal means: (1) Party culture - Whilst all the UK parties ideologically claim the net as their own (Ward et al, 2003), peer pressure from within the party environment and encouragement from party elites can act as a stimulus to action. For example, the techno-enthusiasm of Paddy Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrat leader, was arguably a factor in the use of technology within the party (Ward and Lusoli, 2003). (2) Resources - parties can also 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. (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 and Ward, 1999; 2003). 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 with the electorate.

Parliamentary environment - As with the party environment, the institutional context and setting could influence MPs online behaviour: (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, Westminster 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 computer provision for MPs (Campbell et al, 1999).

This paper examines the personal, constituency and party factors, in particular, and will make reference in a general sense to the parliamentary environment. However, to understand fully the influences of the parliamentary environment then one would need to draw on comparative data that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Research Questions and Methods

In attempting to understand the dynamic between MPs and their use of the Internet, our research was guided by three sets of questions:

- The extent of MPs online activity - How many MPs have sites and has the number grown since previous studies? Did the 2001 election act as a catalyst for expansion? Has the adoption of the technology been as slow as suggested? Obviously, simply assessing the number of sites is a fairly limited measure but it does give some baseline indication of the perceived value of the technology by MPs.
- The nature of MPs online activity - What do MPs use their sites for? What types of information are provided? Are sites primarily concerned with supporting the constituency role of MP or do MPs also stress their national legislative and party functions? How far are MPs exploiting the potential of net to voice their own individual viewpoints? Is there any indication that interactive or innovative online activity is beginning to gain ground?
- The patterns of MPs online activity - What is the balance of factors (personal, constituency, party and institution) which help determine the extent to which MPs develop a web presence and what purpose they use new ICTs for.

Methodology

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 parliamentary website (<http://www.parliament.uk/>) was used as an authoritative source of information on MPs URLs. Additional sources were used to verify the accuracy and completeness of the parliamentary database. For all parties, we used:

- Richard Kimber's 'Politics and Government around the world' list
<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/mps.htm>
- The Guardian newspaper list of MPs
<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/people/browse>
- The Political Studies Association list of MPs
http://www.psa.ac.uk/www/uk_mp_mep_msp.htm
- UKMPS Info
<http://www.ukmps.uk.com>

In addition, we consulted the Conservatives' homepage (<http://www.conservatives.com>) and the Liberal Democrats homepage (<http://www.libdems.org.uk>) as they provide lists of representatives' URLs. A similar list was not available on the Labour Party national website. We thus used two independent sources: Tom Watson MPs list of Labour MPs sites (http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/labour_mps_online.html) and the directory service Toxic Lemon (http://www.toxiclemon.co.uk/Society_and_Culture/Politics/Parties/Labour/MPs/). For the remaining parties we used the national party site, where such information was available. Ad hoc Google searches for 'Name Surname, MP' were used to adjudicate in the case of missing, conflicting or doubtful URLs. The figures for website URLs therefore constitute a measure of the online visibility of MPs rather than MPs websites' nature and status. The URLs collected were then screened for invalid sites, such as broken links, 'dead sites' dating back to the 2001

Table 1. MPs website addresses and valid sites

		% of URLs	n
Valid	Individual site	46 %	215
	Template party	10 %	47
	Shared with local party	2 %	10
	Template other	1 %	3
	Shared with other representative	1 %	3
Invalid	Epolitix	27 %	124
	Broken link	5 %	22
	Not a proper site	4 %	16
	Not updated for over a year	3 %	15
	Under construction	2 %	10
Totals		100 %	466

election and not updated since and Epolitix.com micro-sites.⁵ In January 2004 valid sites were analysed for features and content using an ad-hoc coding scheme developed by the authors, based on previous work by Gibson and Ward on election candidates' websites (Gibson and Ward 2000; Ward and Gibson, 2003). The scheme includes coding items for information, interaction, presentation and links provided by the MPs on their websites. To assess explanatory factors behind ICT usage we gathered MP-level political-demographic data, 2001 election information and Internet penetration in the constituency from a variety of sources.⁶

Results

Website adoption and predictors

Overall, we found more than 460 website addresses for serving MPs. This corresponds to about 71% of all serving MPs. However, a fair proportion of URLs surveyed were not linked to a valid and functioning website (Table 1). That is, a number of sites were set up for the 2001 general election and not updates since, or the domain name expired soon after. We found that 27% of total URLs referred the visitor to the Epolitix service described above; 7% were either broken links or under construction, while 8 % were out of date and single pages on party sites. Upon weeding, 278 MPs' websites were coded as valid and functioning (42 %). This figure is considerably higher than the 28% reported by Jackson for March 2002 – nearly 18 month before, an increase of 66%. This is due both to the wider range of sources we used to locate URLs,

⁵ 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>).

⁶ We wish to thank Prof. Longley and his E-Society colleagues at UCL for providing useful data on Internet penetration at constituency level; Prof. Iain McLean and colleagues at Oxford for making available MP-level demographic data in readily usable format; Richard Kimber at Keele for providing 'neat and clean' 2001 election results. We also need to thank Emma Higginson at Epolitix.com for making available numbers and addresses of MPs currently on their system. Any inaccuracies in the update, use and interpretation of data are entirely our own.

Table 2. Website type by party

	Website at all types			
	<i>Individual sites</i>	<i>Template party</i>	<i>Shared with local party or other MP</i>	<i>Epolitix</i>
Labour	41%	18%	2%	34%
Conservative	71%		4%	22%
Libdems	71%		9%	18%
SNP	100%			
Plaid Cymru	33%			67%
UUP	33%			67%
DUP	100%			
Independent	100%			

which yielded a more accurate count of base URL, as well as an actual growth during the current legislative session. Considering valid sites only, the great majority of MPs have either an individual website, personally owned, hosted and maintained. For instance, Michael Portillo MP has a very media-oriented website, which includes short films, broadcast recordings and audio files from his private life along with politically relevant information.⁷ Alternatively, MPs might have a websites modelled on a template provided by the party, and locally maintained with varying degrees of inventiveness – e.g. Labour Web-in-a-box (Table 2). We also found great variance in website freshness, i.e. the average frequency of website update: weekly or more frequently (33% of sites), once or twice a month (36%) over two months (18%). We can expect sites being updated more frequently to provide a better indication of the MPs' willingness to and success in getting their message across. However, in the main the updating was normally limited to the posting of press releases or news stories. Many sites remained static in terms of the vast majority of other features.

*Explaining Presence*⁸

To understand the incentive/s and resources for an MP to set up and maintain an online presence, we used the framework set out above and examined the influence of the following factors:⁹

- Personal (e.g. Skills/interest, age, gender, cohort, job)
- Party
- Constituency (e.g. seat marginality, Internet penetration)

In terms of personal factors, we found that gender makes no difference as to the MPs' likelihood of having a functioning website (Table 3). Similarly, parliamentary position is of minimal importance. Contrary to our expectation, MPs with ministerial and other government-related posts (frontbench and whip) do not seem less likely to have website than backbenchers.

⁷ Found at <http://www.michaelportillo.co.uk/>

⁸ All results reported in this section on are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

⁹ Though we identified other factors influencing the likelihood of an MP having a site – as MPs' Internet skills, motivations, and ICTs and staff resources – content analysis data allowed for the testing of the mentioned factors only. MPs' interviews, currently in progress, will provide additional information on MPs attitudes and resources.

Table 3. Factors predicting website adoption

		Website adoption		
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Gender	Female	42%		No
	Male	42%		
Age of MP in years (mean)		50	54	.36 *** (Eta)
Entered House	Before 1992	30%		.26 *** (Gamma)
	In 1992	43%		
	In 1997	48%		
	In 2001	52%		
MP govt roles	Frontbencher	48%		.10 ** (Phi)
	Privy Council	34%		
	Cabinet/Shadow	44%		
	Govt whip	47%		
National party	Labour	40%		.15 *** (Phi)
	Conservative	44%		
	LibDem	67%		
Scotland	SNP	60%		No
Wales	Plaid Cymru	25%		No
Northern Ireland	UUP	17%		.11 ** (Phi)
	SF	0%		
	DUP	20%		
	SDLP	0%		
Seat % majority		20	24	** (t-test)
Index of Internet connectivity (mean)		102	90	* (t-test)

NOTES: Internet connectivity is calculated for British constituencies only.

* = sig. $p < 0.05$. ** = sig. $p < 0.01$, *** = sig. $p = 0.001$

The only significant and negative coefficient is of MPs in the Privy Council, which is however related to age. Conversely, however, personal factors that have more impact are age and parliamentary cohort. Younger MPs are significantly more likely to have a site than older colleagues. Also, MPs who entered the HoC following the 1997 and 2001 election are much more likely to have a site than MPs from earlier cohorts. As MPs' age and cohort can be thought of as interrelated, we tried to separate the effects of each with a nested table (Table 4).¹⁰

First, we find that cohort matters per se, progressing over time from 30% (pre 1992) to 43% (1992) to 48%, (1997) finally to 53% (2001). If the trend continues, we might predict an overall

¹⁰ The relation holds both because MPs grow older after entering the HoC (though not because recent cohorts are any younger than previous cohorts). A different analytical strategy would be to consider MPs' age when they enter the HoC rather than current age. We opt here for a more robust table nesting strategy.

Table 4. Age and cohort effects on website adoption

		% of valid sites		
Entered Hoc	Before 1992	Age of MPs	30-44	33%
			45-50	36%
			51-54	37%
			55-59	26%
			60+	28%
			Total < 1992	30 %
		In 1992	Age of MPs	30-44
45-50	54%			
51-54	44%			
55-59	36%			
60+	21%			
Total 1992	43 %			
In 1997	Age of MPs		30-44	58%
		45-50	52%	
		51-54	35%	
		55-59	42%	
		60+	43%	
		Total 1997	48 %	
	In 2001	Age of MPs	30-44	58%
45-50			42%	
51-54			50%	
55-59			56%	
60+			50%	
Total 2001+			53%	

50% adoption rate after the next general election. While cohort effects work across all age categories, we find that age has an important effect for MPs who entered the HoC in 1992 and 1997. Both before 1992 and at the 2001 GE, website adoption is low in the case of older cohorts and high for the latter cohort. This suggests that adoption is universally low for MPs entering before 1992; dependent on age in 1992 and 1997; and universally high in 2001.

Party factors are equally important predictors of website adoption. On the one hand, party matters, as Liberal Democrat MPs are significantly more likely to set up websites than colleagues from other parties (+ 25%). Conversely, Labour and Tory MPs gravitate around the average, respectively 40% and 44%. Though numbers are too small for statistical significance, SNP MPs appear to have high levels of website adoption (60%), while MPs from minor parties in Wales and Northern Ireland all have a much lower web presence, particularly the NI parties where only 11% have live websites.

Constituency factors also proved to be important predictors. Websites are set up for marginal rather than safer constituencies. There are two interrelated aspects to this finding. On the one hand, MPs for marginal constituencies (majority / total vote < 10 %) have a small but

Table 5. Features on MPs websites

<i>Information</i>	Contact details	98 %
	MP biography	96 %
	Local and national news	80 %
	Surgery information	71%
	Press releases	64 %
	Information on HoC work	60 %
	Constituency / regional information	58 %
	Information on issues / campaigns	45 %
	Result at last General Election	26 %
	Online MP diary	14 %
Frequently asked questions	13 %	
<i>Interaction</i>	E-mail contact	88 %
	E-mail newsletter sign-on	33 %
	Online recruitment, join, donate	30 %
	Online surveys / polls	16%
	Online surgery	7 %
	Discussion board / chat room	6 %
	E-campaigning	5%
<i>Links</i>	Links to party	91 %
	Links to constituency sites	77 %
	Links to the HoC	73 %
	Links to govt departments	44 %
	Links to the media	40 %
	Links to pressure groups	34 %
	Links to other MPs	24 %

N = 278 valid websites

statistically significant better chance of having a site (+ 8%). On the other hand, MPs for the safest constituencies (majority / total vote > 35 %) are less likely than other MPs to set up websites (- 9%). At the centre of the distribution the relation between marginality and website adoption is weaker, though it remains significant all along the marginality curve (Table 3).

Although the marginal constituencies with sites are not as large as a 'constant campaign' scenario would predict, this finding provides an indication of the professionalisation of MPs role to include a significant campaign commitment in peacetime. This takes more the shape of a pre-emptive strategy rather than an active vote-seeking posture, although interview data suggests that MPs from different parties are beginning to see the Internet as an increasingly important campaign tool.

MPs for constituencies with a higher level of Internet penetration are more likely to have a website than MPs for less wired constituencies. At a 100 point increase in the Internet penetration index (range: 1-490, centred at 100, SD = 73) corresponds a 5% increase in the likelihood of website adoption. This is a further manifestation of the digital divide, whereby citizens living in areas lacking access to the Internet are further disenfranchised. For instance,

constituents in central London¹¹ are more likely to have a wired MP than, let us say, constituents in Blaenau Gwent, Dagenham and Barking, or Coventry North East, at the bottom of the internet penetration scale. However, interview and content analysis of sites also suggests that a number of MPs for differently wired constituencies are aware of the digital divide. On the one hand, MPs frequently remarked that no priority was given to e-mail and website contact, and that *wired* constituents were not allowed to 'jump the queue'. On the other hand, a number of MPs' websites mention the campaign to take broadband Internet access to the constituency, sometimes acting as a contact point to organise the collection of the required signatures.¹²

Website features

Importantly, the adoption of a website indicates the propensity of MPs to extend their roles and capabilities in the digital realm. However, we also wanted to know which of the roles of the MPs were either enhanced, re-enacted or limited by electronic means, and, more in general, what impact the Internet has on representation – if any. In the main, the survey indicates that MPs use websites for three analytically distinct categories of information: background information, specialised information and snapshot information (Table 5). First, virtually all websites surveyed included general information such as the MPs biography and the contact details (including e-mail, 88%), plus a selection of local and national news (80%). A significant proportion also provided more specialised information on the roles of the MP: 70% included information on constituency surgeries, 64% included formal press release information and 60% details of the MPs' work in Westminster (speeches, EDMs and questions). Finally, a minority of sites (45%) also features information on issues and campaigns championed by the MP. Snapshot information is provided by a minority of the sites: Result at last General Election (26%), on online MP diary (14%) and a list of frequently asked questions (13%). Much of this information was of a highly standardised nature very few sites appeared to have personalised information. One exception was Ian Cawsey's highly idiosyncratic website that featured his life story (sporting achievements and musical talents) and many photographs, all written in a self-deprecating tone. When interviewed Cawsey stated that one of the main functions of the site was to "make him appear human".

In terms of website linking practice, we noted how MPs linked to their three main units of political reference to provide a further idea of the basic orientation of the site: 91% to the party, 77% had constituency links and 73% provide a link to the parliament website (73 %). Far less link to media websites (40%), government departments (44 %) or campaign and pressure groups' sites (34 %).

Interactivity

The survey also examined the provision of interactive opportunities on the sites. Results for interaction were much lower than the figures for information provision. Only one in three MPs provided a periodic e-mail bulletin with local and /or national news. Mostly, this was provided on templated party sites, rather than independent individual sites. Surprisingly, given the nature of constituency representation, one in three MPs also provided the opportunity to join their respective party /donate, though again the majority would provide a link to the national party site rather than recruiting directly on the site. Labour's web-in-a box template provides such features as standard to the site. Direct, MP-to-constituent interaction are minimal, with a small minority providing features such as online polls/surveys (16%), online surgeries (7%),

¹¹ Cities of London & Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, Hampstead & Highgate and Kensington & Chelsea.

¹² See for instance the sites of Sir George Young, MP (<http://www.sir-george-young.org.uk/>), or Douglas Alexander, MP (<http://www.douglasalexander.labour.co.uk>).

discussion boards (6%) or e-campaign opportunities (5 %). A few notable examples of interactive MPs are the four MPs with weblogs (Liberal Democrat Richard Allen, Labour MPs Tom Watson, Clive Soley and Austin Mitchell)¹³ which, in the case of Allen and Watson in particular, have developed significant levels of interest and engagement. Sites which provided an open guest book or discussion area are almost universally a failure in the sense that there is little actual interactive debate and indeed most have very few posts at all. One exception here is Siobhan McDonagh's site whose discussion board has a reasonable number of posts and responses from the MP.¹⁴ One minor interactive development which may increase in importance is the use of e-consultation exercises. David Laws site provides details of a pilot exercise in online constituency consultation being hosted by the Epolitix group. Documents and information on selected issues are posted on the site and constituents can register and send their views on selected issues.¹⁵ Steve Webb, Liberal Democrat for North Avon, has also attempted a similar exercise where in six consultations he has received over 3000 responses from constituents.¹⁶

Locality-Centrality

We created two index scales to measure both *locality* and *centrality* of the MPs websites' features. Locality is defined here as reference to local information, local news, surgery details, local issues, local e-news and link to local party and constituency (standardised, 10-point). Centrality was constructed from national news, national issues, national e-news, information on HoC work, and links to the national party and government departments (standardised, 10-point).¹⁷ Data suggests that websites tend to lean slightly more on locality (mean = 5.4) rather than on centrality (5.1). Although the two scale measure different aspects, the two indices are moderately correlated, as to the greater provision of central features corresponds a greater availability of local features (Pearson's R = 0.4). The two scales were then correlated with the usual indicators. The locality scale had non-significant relations with all the indicators considered. This suggests that the provision of localised content is not polarised along MPs demographics, constituency type of party lines. Rather, all MPs' websites provide a similar amount and mix of locally-oriented features. Conversely, the centrality scale was found to be connected with party, specifically the Labour Party, who scores higher than all other parties (+ 0.5 – sig. p < 0.01), and the Conservatives, who score lower than average (- 0.4 – sig. p. <0.05). This possibly reflects the different strategies of Labour and Conservatives as to the centralised vs. decentralised provision of website structures and content.

¹³ Respectively found at <http://www.sheffieldhallam.org.uk/blog/> (Allen), <http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/>, (Watson) http://clivesoleymp.typepad.com/clive_soley_mp/ (Soley) and <http://www.austinmitchell.org/>, (Mitchell).

¹⁴ Found at <http://www.siobhainmcdonagh.org.uk>.

¹⁵ Two other MPs John McFall and Crispin Blunt are also taking part in the Epolitix pilot project which runs from November 2003-April 2004.

¹⁶ Found at <http://www.stevewebb.org.uk>.

¹⁷ For the sake of analytical clarity, centrality does not make a distinction between national party and HoC features, and it is used as an analytical counterpart to locality.

Table 6. Main parties and site features

Features	Labour	Tories	Libdems
Press releases	-	-	+
Constituency info	=	=	-
News	=	+	=
HoC work	=	-	+
Surgery details	+	-	=
E-news	+	-	+ (local)
Join / donate	+	-	+
E-campaign	-	=	+
Links (present)	Govt departments	Local party, media	Other MPs
Links (absent)			Govt departments

Online Dissent and Discussion: Tuition fees

As a further measure to assess the extent to which current issues are discussed and dissent is aired, we coded Labour MPs' sites for mentions of the debate surrounding the government's legislative proposals for university funding. At the time of coding this issue was at the top of the political agenda. There was a significant disagreement within the PLP and suggestions that the government might be defeated in a HoC vote. Despite the issue being widely discussed in the media and television, on MPs' sites the issue was, for the most part, studiously ignored. If one was trying to find out your MPs' opinion or how they were likely to vote on this issue, then mostly one would have searched in vain. Only twenty (12%) Labour MPs' websites mentioned the tuition fees issue at the time of coding. Of these, nine were in favour of the government proposals; eight were against, while three presented the issue more neutrally to visitors. Joan Ruddock and Anne Campbell actually solicited online responses from constituents on the issue, whilst Derek Wyatt placed considerable amounts of evidence for and against the proposal on his site allowing visitors to make their own mind up. Some of those who were favourable spent time explaining why they had changed their mind on the issue. Whilst this is only one issue, the lack of discussion online given the contentious nature of the proposal illustrates the generally blandness of the information contained on the sites. Far from being the harangue that the Economist suggested (see above), MPs websites are more likely to gently lull the visitor to sleep.

Explaining Content

We also asked whether the predictors of a website presence could also help explain the variance in the content of the sites. Overall, however, we could detect few general patterns as being significant. Amongst the personal factors, again, gender made no difference on any of the content features described above. MPs age made little difference too. Although younger MPs - especially in marginal constituencies - tended to provide e-campaign opportunities much more frequently than older MPs, this seems to be an isolated finding. MPs cohort yields somewhat more interesting results, as 2001-elected representatives tend to be weaker on local issues, while the 1997 cohort seems to be more active online across the board. The constituency factors of marginality and connectivity have only limited impacts. Marginality seems to have little effect apart from an interesting, higher proportion of sites promoting e-campaign activities. Internet connectivity was related to more news and more consistent e-mail feedback.

Party affiliation accounts for the most significant differences in site features (Table 6). Comparatively, the Liberal Democrat MPs seem to be providing the most opportunities for online interactions, followed by Labour and trailing Conservative MPs. In terms of information provision, the situation is more balanced. Labour Party representatives have an edge on the Tories as regards the provision of constituency surgery information, while the trail to the Liberal Democrats in terms of provision of press releases. Conservative MPs tend to post a wealth of news information to their sites. Liberal Democrats top the table in terms of information they provide on their Westminster work. Overall then, MPs from different parties appear to be using their websites in internally consistent ways, different from other parties. To some extent, this is a reflection of different party online strategies (Lusoli & Ward, 2003), and the support they provide to their serving MPs.

Summary

If we return to our original questions relating to the extent of growth, the nature of online activity and patterns of online behaviour, we find that the simple picture of web activity having little consequence and MPs as unengaged technophobes maybe stereotypically appealing but does not necessarily provide a rounded account.

Website Growth

The level of MPs activity online has expanded considerably over the last 18 months, by more than 50% since the last available term of comparison (Jackson, 2003). The practice of creating a website is becoming increasingly normalised. On the basis of the recent expansion then it is not unreasonable to suppose that around 70% of representatives (including those with Epolitix sites) will have sites after the next election. However, the numbers who are using their sites for active communication (i.e. regularly updating) as opposed to a static cyber-pamphlet are still a relatively small minority perhaps around 15-20% of all MPs. It seems that many MPs set-up sites but are either uncertain what to do with them or lack the motivation to maintain them.

Roles and Relations: Website Content

In relation to the potential of ICTs to facilitate change, undoubtedly the primary target for most of the sites is the constituency, rather than party and parliamentary/policy roles. In many respects websites are becoming another aspect of the professionalised constituency service model. For those with access, more information is available than ever before and MPs are more contactable than previously. Websites and email further trends in transparency and openness. Of course, very few are so far engaging in much more than the modernisation of their existing practices. However, the innovators of today, such as those using e-consultation or blogging, are setting the long term agenda which others will follow.

The relationship with the party online is a mixed one. Much of the content of sites is standardised rather than individualised. In part this is a reflection of the growth of template politics. For the most part, though MPs are happy to promote the party with only a handful of sites failing to make reference to their party affiliation on their homepage. Within this generalised format there were minor examples of creeping individualisation. For example, the number MPs now providing records of the Early Day Motions they sign, or providing their own views on issues. Overall, however, the technology alone of course does not create dissent. Dissenters do not have a monopoly on use of the technology as the tuition fees issue demonstrates. Websites and e-newsletters provide MPs with space to justify their positions whether they support their own party or not. One of the benefits of the technology from an MP perspective is the ability to put across their own message unmediated and at length if they so wish.

The policy and campaign role was the least prominent on the sites but again the innovators may show the way. In the conclusions to his book, Searing (1994:384) refers to another possible future role - that of constituency-based policy representation. In this case, Searing links this to the argument that rule changes in the Labour Party (deselection) might force MPs to take act more as delegate for constituency activists. E-consultation could facilitate MPs in this sort of constituency-based policy representation. Although MPs using e-consultation are generally looking to for wider legitimacy than simply party activists. It may be possible over time for MPs to build local online networks of policy experts.

Explanatory frameworks

The personal, constituency and party factors set out above all clearly play a role in determining both MPs' decisions to go online and to a lesser extent the content. Personal factors are in some ways the most difficult to measure, nevertheless, whilst age / parliamentary cohort clearly play a role, gender or HoC position do not appear to make much difference. In this paper we did not have the data to properly test the impact of skills or attitudes; however, preliminary interview material suggests that skills/interest do play a key role. Certainly, two of leading MPs pushing the e-democracy agenda (Brian White and Richard Allan) have qualifications or a background in IT. Interviews have also revealed that staff can sometimes have a key role in pushing ICTs in spite of the MP. One staff remarked that the MP would not be 'impressed if he knew of the effort [she] put into website maintenance', and would rather have her employ the time for constituency work.

Perhaps the more interesting explanatory factors are those of party and constituency. Contrary to Jackson's findings, we found that party matters. Essentially, there is what might be called a 'Liberal Democrat effect'. Liberal Democrat Party philosophy, expectation and a strong symbolic attachment from relatively early period of the net may explain this (Uhm and Hague, 2001). However, the idea of net being of benefit to smaller party representatives per se did not apply. Indeed, the Northern Ireland party representatives were much less likely to have web presence. In part, this is because Northern Ireland is a party system within a party system. So whilst they maybe small parties in a Westminster sense, they are all major players and have significant press coverage in their own region. Hence, the idea of incentives to use the net to get their message across is less applicable here. Parties are also important in providing resources for MPs. The web-in-a box service accounts for some of the recent growth and professionalisation of content amongst Labour sites. Moreover, there is evidence that the Conservatives are catching up though, for instance the recently revamped e-news, the increased reliance on Politico's a provider of MPs websites, and the recent customisable newsfeed from Conservatives.com. In regard to constituency factors, we again disagree with Jackson and argue that marginality, in terms of providing an incentive for MPs creating a web presence, does indeed matter. Locality also matters in the respect of Internet access. Our study indicates that the digital divide is very much reflected in terms of parliamentary representation. In short, highly wired marginal constituencies tend to have wired MPs, whilst safe unwired – mainly Labour constituencies – do not.

Overall, it seems that a complex combination of personal, party political, electoral and technological factors explains the creation and functions of MPs website in general, and the consequent rise in the figures for MPs 'wiredness' in the last 18 months. As Richard Allan MP remarked, House of Commons representatives with websites have moved from 'weird' to 'wired' status in little more than five years.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview with the authors, 10 March 2004.

Conclusion

What we have seen so far in terms of MPs online activities is largely a modernisation process rather than the significant attempt to create new relations or new forms of democratic practice. A few, committed MPs are currently experimenting with interactive forms of communication, and they may well set the agenda for the future. However, what we see currently is a rather fragmented state of representation online, where personal, party and constituency resources and skills are drawn upon and reproduced rather than enhanced and generated by electronic means. As we noted with regard to constituency factors, the lack of MP online presence in areas of low Internet access, whilst not surprising, underscores the digital divide. The participation and representation gaps maybe being exacerbated by ICTs. Even more worrying in the long term is that even if MPs become more interactive, more professional and more accessible online, would it actually make much difference? Whereas at the individual level MPs may possibly use online technologies to boost their constituency profile and improve their constituency service, in the wider sense the answer is probably not. The technologies are unlikely to re-engage those who lack interest or mistrust the system and institutions. The majority of the research conducted so far shows that online participation tends to be dominated by the already politically active, interested and engaged. Furthermore, despite the fact that MPs are probably more accessible, work harder and provide more information about themselves than at any given time before, this seems to have had little impact on public perceptions of representative politics. Consequently, unless technological advancement and innovations are located within wider reforms of the representative political system then they will have a marginal impact on parliamentary democracy.

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