

‘From Weird to Wired’: MPs, the Internet and Representative Politics in the UK

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Westminster MPs have regularly been criticised for their failure to take advantage of the democratic possibilities of the Internet, particularly in light of the continuing problems of engaging public interest in representative institutions. Yet, so far, there have been few studies of their online activities. This article examines the growth and function of UK MPs’ websites and how far technology might facilitate changes in their constituency, party and parliament roles. The results indicate a significant growth over the past three years, although those with independent websites are still in a minority. It is also clear that personal factors (notably age), constituency factors, such as electoral marginality and the technological profile of the locality, as well as party factors all help explain patterns of MPs’ activity online. For the most part, however, content analysis of sites reveals a rather static and cautious approach to web communication which represents a modernising rather than democratising strategy.

The past decade has seen a growing interest in the potential of new information communication technologies (ICTs) to reconnect the public with politicians and more broadly to help redefine representative politics. In part, this concern reflects an increasingly urgent desire to find solutions to the apparent lack of interest and mistrust in politicians and our traditional democratic institutions. New technologies, such as the Internet, have been viewed as offering a convenient partial solution to some of the problems of disengagement. But whilst there has been considerable speculation about the democratic potential of ICTs, media accounts of politicians’ web use provide a depressing picture for techno-optimists. It is commonly perceived that few politicians are Internet

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savvy and MPs have even been accused of Internet autism.¹ This lack of adaptation to new ICTs has been seen as yet another symptom of the irrelevance of MPs and the Westminster Parliament. Yet, there have been relatively few comprehensive studies of the online activities of Westminster MPs to confirm this picture accurately.² This article, therefore, seeks to address some of these issues in the context of broader long-term changes in 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 more interactive, personal and individualised patterns 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, such as constituency marginality, which drive MPs to create and develop a web presence. We conclude that whilst the picture may not be quite as depressing as sometimes portrayed in the media, there is little to suggest that politicians view new ICTs as much more than tools for administrative modernisation.

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 first need to understand the changes in the broader context of the roles, relations and behaviour of Westminster MPs. The tradition of the 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.³ Repeated studies of the roles and attitudes of MPs since the 1970s have identified a number of long-term shifts in their behaviour which are outlined below:

- The growth of the constituency service role. Searing's seminal study of the role of Westminster MPs identified a significant group who saw their primary focus in terms of the constituency.⁴ 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.⁵

- The growth of policy advocates. Searing's work also suggested that policy advocates, who aim to influence government policy, represented the largest grouping within parliament. Searing's research indicated 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. MPs have sometimes been viewed as lobby fodder for their parties in parliament but 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 are often accused of being on-message automatons, slavishly loyal to the leadership, have shown an increasing desire to rebel on a wide range of issues.⁶ 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 a result of backbench rebellions. It is not simply in parliament that tensions have arisen between MPs and their parties. Tensions have also arisen at the constituency level, where since the 1960s local parties have become more demanding of their MPs. In some areas, local parties have extended their formal control over parliamentary candidates. Labour Party rule changes in the 1980s allowed local parties not only to select candidates but to deselect sitting MPs, raising the prospect of MPs becoming local party delegates. In reality, deselection of sitting MPs is rare but the informal threat means that MPs are inclined at least to take more note of local party activists.⁷
- The growth of professionalism. Underlying many of the changes discussed is a general trend towards the professionalisation of politics.⁸ One aspect of professionalisation has been the growth of so-called career politicians who devote 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 but 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.⁹ MPs are, therefore, often spending more hours solely devoted to their work in Westminster and in their constituencies.

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 is unlikely that politicians were ever revered, survey evidence from the 1970s onwards suggests that public knowledge of, and interest and trust in MPs as a collective body has currently fallen to their lowest ever levels.¹⁰ 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 and parliaments.¹¹

MPs AND THE POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET

Against this gloomy backdrop of public disengagement with representative parliamentary politics, it is perhaps not surprising that the growth of the Internet and other ICTs has been seized upon as a means of promoting change within the system of representative parliamentary politics. In terms of individual MPs, there is potential for ICTs to facilitate changes in three areas:

- Constituency–MP relations. At 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 email 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.¹² 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 using new ICTs for consultative purposes through e-forums or e-surveys, allowing constituents to interact with the MP through e-surgeries, or developing a regular two-way dialogue with citizens through chat rooms, bulletin boards or weblogs.¹³

- Party–MP relations. One could suggest 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. 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.¹⁴ Arguably, therefore, it is easier to challenge the party line and then to network online with other like-minded dissenters.
- 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 selected issues. This could 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: Firstly, *modernisation*, where new media technologies are used simply to increase the administrative efficiency of existing services and to improve the image of MPs and parliaments generally. This involves limited participative opportunities but is focused around a more consumer style of democracy.¹⁵ Secondly, *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.¹⁶ Finally, some critics 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 and

referendums online some might ask why citizens would bother with the middleman.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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 MPs' sites has grown from around seven per cent in 1997 to around 20–30 per cent by 2002.¹⁹ 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 have always done.²⁰

The suggested reasons for this limited performance have centred on the lack of resources and incentives to use the technology creatively. MPs often complain about the relatively poor 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 email 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.²¹ For some, therefore, email is seen as a 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.²²

In comparative terms, Westminster has a poor reputation, particularly in relation to the newer devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales.²³ In reality, though, Westminster may actually be less of a laggard than first appears. Outside the US, legislators have generally been slow to develop a web presence. Thus figures of 30 per cent of MPs online are comparable with many other systems.²⁴ 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 mixed success.²⁵

ASSESSING MPs ONLINE: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

If we are to develop a more systematic understanding of MPs' online behaviour we need to build a framework for our expectations. As with other forms of MPs' activities, we expect that the extent to which they use ICTs is likely to be shaped by a combination of personal, constituency, party and parliamentary factors and will 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.²⁶ Moreover, it need not necessarily be the MPs themselves that are central in this respect. An MP's staff can be crucial in pushing forward the use of ICTs since they are likely to run and manage emails 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 Internet.²⁷ 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 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.²⁸ Consequently, cyberspace might offer a new unmediated space in which to do this. More specifically, 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.²⁹
- (3) Parliamentary position. MPs' online activity could also be defined by their particular job within the House of Commons. One argument is that front-benchers and members of the executive might have fewer 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.

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 claims in his study that marginality made no difference to MPs creating a web presence.³⁰ However, Ward and Gibson found that candidates/sitting MPs in marginal constituencies at the last general election (2001) were indeed more likely to have a web presence.³¹
- (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 email with 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 Internet as their own,³² 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.³³
- (2) Party resources. Parties can also provide practical resources for their representatives through advice and cheap provision of web software, for example 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.³⁴ 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.

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. These include allowances to employ staff, equipment budgets and systems and IT training, and all are 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.³⁵

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Using the framework set out above, 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 the Internet 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 institutional) 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 was used to detect MPs' website 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. A range of additional sources was also used to verify the accuracy and completeness of the parliamentary database.³⁶ The URLs collected were then 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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. The authors also conducted 35 interviews with MPs which provide background information in this context.

RESULTS

Website Adoption and Predictors

Overall, we found more than 460 website addresses for serving MPs. This corresponds to about 71 per cent of all serving MPs. However, a fair proportion of URLs surveyed were deemed invalid for coding purposes. A number of sites were set up for the 2001 general election and had not been updated since. We found that 27 per cent of total URLs referred the visitor to the Epolitix service described above; seven per cent were either broken links or under construction, while eight per cent were out of date and single pages on party sites. After weeding, 278 MPs' websites were coded as valid and functioning (42 per cent). This figure is considerably higher than the 28 per cent reported by Jackson for March 2002, nearly 18 months before – an increase of 66 per cent. This is due both to the wider range of sources we used to locate URLs, which perhaps 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 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.³⁹ Alternatively, MPs might have websites modelled on a template provided by the party, and locally maintained with varying degrees of inventiveness – for example, Labour's web-in-a-box. Twenty nine per cent (47) of Labour sites used this web-in-a-box template.⁴⁰ We also found great variance in website freshness, that is, the average frequency of website update: weekly or more frequently (33 per cent of sites), once or twice a month (36 per cent) over

two months (18 per cent). We can expect sites being updated more frequently to provide a better indication of the MP's 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*⁴¹

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:⁴²

- Personal (for example, skills/interest, age, gender, cohort, job)
- Party
- Constituency (for example, seat marginality, Internet penetration)

In terms of personal factors, we found that gender makes no difference to the MP's likelihood of having a functioning website. 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 a website than backbenchers. Conversely, however, personal factors that have more of an impact are age and parliamentary cohort. In line with our expectations, younger MPs are significantly more likely to have a site than older colleagues. Also, MPs who entered the House of Commons following the 1997 and 2001 election are much more likely to

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
Total valid URLs		60	278
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
Total invalid URLs		40	187
Total URLs		100	465

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.⁴³

First, we find that cohort matters *per se*, progressing over time from 30 per cent (pre-1992) to 43 per cent (1992) to 48 per cent (1997) and finally to 53 per cent (2001). If the trend continues, we might predict an overall 50 per cent 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 House of Commons in 1992 and 1997. Both before 1992 and at the 2001 general election, 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.

Unsurprisingly, MPs' personal backgrounds and resources matter in a variety of ways. Using Pippa Norris' British Representation Study data, we

TABLE 2
FACTORS PREDICTING WEBSITE ADOPTION

		Website Adoption		Statistical Difference
		Yes	No	
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%		No
	Privy Council	34%		.10 ** (Phi)
	Cabinet/Shadow	44%		No
	Govt whip	47%		No
National party	Labour	40%		No
	Conservative	44%		No
	LibDem	67%		.15 *** (Phi)
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.

TABLE 3
AGE AND COHORT EFFECTS ON WEBSITE ADOPTION

Entered HoC		% of Valid Sites	
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	70
		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

found that representatives who make frequent use of email and/or go online for information and news, are very much more likely to have a website.⁴⁴ Both results remain valid when controlling for age, cohort and Internet penetration in the constituency, the factors highlighted above as important predictors of a website. Also, a positive attitude to ICTs for parliamentary work – the belief that MPs should use the web to keep in touch with constituents – is reflected by the representative's greater likelihood to have a website. Yet a representative's belief that it is one's duty to have a working email address does not help explain his/her building a web presence. Even though we do not wish to generalise from a sample composed of a third of all MPs, this suggests that IT skills and resources are valid in general, while the importance attributed by MPs to different new media outlets rather depends on the technology in question.⁴⁵

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 per cent). By contrast, Labour and Tory MPs gravitate around the average, respectively 40 per cent and 44 per cent. Though numbers are too small for statistical significance, SNP MPs appear to have high levels of website adoption (60 per cent), while MPs from minor parties in Wales and Northern Ireland all have a much lower web presence. For instance, only two (Peter Robinson, DUP and Roy Beggs, UUP), of the 18 Northern Ireland MPs were found to have live websites at the time of the study.⁴⁶

Constituency factors also proved to be important predictors. Websites are more likely to be 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 per cent) have a small but statistically significant better chance of having a site (+8 per cent). On the other hand, MPs for the safest constituencies (majority/total vote >35 per cent) are less likely than other MPs to set up websites (-9 per cent). At the centre of the distribution the relation between marginality and website adoption is weaker, though it remains significant all along the marginality curve.

Although the marginal constituencies with sites are not as large as a 'permanent 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 additional interview data suggest 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. A 100 point increase in the Internet penetration index (range: 1-490, centred at 100, SD = 73) corresponds with a five per cent 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 London⁴⁷ are more likely to have a wired MP than 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 acutely aware of the digital divide. MPs frequently remarked that no priority was given to email 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 number of signatures.⁴⁸

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 enhanced, re-enacted or limited by electronic means, and, more generally, 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 4). First, virtually all websites surveyed included general information such as the MP's biography and the contact details (including email, 88 per cent), plus a selection of local and national news (80 per cent). A significant proportion also provided more specialised information on the roles of the MP: 70 per cent included information on constituency surgeries, 64 per cent included formal press release information and 60 per cent details of the MP's work in Westminster (speeches, EDMs and questions). Finally, a minority of sites (45 per cent) also features information on issues and campaigns

TABLE 4
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	07
	Discussion board/chat room	06
E-campaigning	05	
<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.

championed by the MP. Snapshot information is provided by a minority of the sites: result at last general election (26 per cent), on online MP diary (14 per cent) and a list of frequently asked questions (13 per cent). Much of this information was of a highly standardised nature with very few sites appearing 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.

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 per cent to the party, 77 per cent had constituency links and 73 per cent provide a link to the parliament website. Far less link to media websites (40 per cent), government departments (44 per cent) or campaign and pressure groups' sites (34 per cent).

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 email 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 or 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 is minimal, with a small minority providing features such as online polls/surveys (16 per cent), online surgeries (seven per cent), discussion boards (six per cent) or e-campaign opportunities (five per cent). A few notable examples of interactive MPs are the five with web logs (Liberal Democrat Richard Allan, Labour MPs Tom Watson, Clive Soley, Sean Woodward and Austin Mitchell)⁴⁹ which, in the case of Allan 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 had a reasonable number of posts and responses from the MP.⁵⁰ One 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.⁵¹ Steve Webb, Liberal Democrat for

Northavon, has also attempted a similar exercise where in six consultations he claimed to have received over 3,000 responses from constituents.⁵²

Locality–Centrality

To further assess the focus of sites, we created two index scales to measure both *locality* and *centrality* of the features of the MPs' websites. 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 House of Commons work, and links to the national party and government departments (standardised, 10-point).⁵³ Data suggest that websites tend to lean slightly more towards locality (mean = 5.4) rather than national features (5.1). Although the two scales measure different aspects, the two indices are moderately correlated, as to the greater provision of central features corresponds to 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, which 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.

Online Dissent and Discussion

In general, we wanted to know whether rebels in the House of Commons had an increased likelihood of setting up a website, as a platform to express their dissent.⁵⁴ In fact, only one in five of the top rebels between 2001 and 2003 have a valid website, which is significantly lower than the ratio for average MPs. For the cohort entering the House of Commons in 2001, then, we found no significant correlation between rebellion and website presence, regardless of party affiliation. 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 Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and suggestions that the government might be defeated in a House of Commons vote. Despite the issue being widely discussed in the media, on MPs' sites the issue was, for the most part,

studiously ignored. If one were trying to find out the opinion of one's MP or how they were likely to vote on this issue, then mostly one would have searched in vain. Only 20 Labour MPs' websites (12 per cent) 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 up their own mind. 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 general blandness of the information contained on most MPs' sites.

Explaining Content

We asked in addition 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. An MP's age made little difference too. Although younger MPs, especially in marginal constituencies, tended to provide e-campaign opportunities, this seems to be an isolated finding. Cohort analysis yields somewhat more interesting results, as the 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 also 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 email feedback.

Party affiliation accounts for the most significant differences in site features (Table 5). Comparatively, the Liberal Democrat MPs seem to be providing the most opportunities for online interactions, followed by Labour and then 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 they trail 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 the 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 and the support they provide to their serving MPs.⁵⁵

TABLE 5
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 to other sites	+Govt departments	+Local party +Media	–Govt departments +Other MPs

Notes: Symbols indicate the likelihood of finding a specific feature on party sites as compared to other parties. – indicates less likely, + indicates more likely, while = indicates equally likely.

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 MPs as unengaged technophobes maybe stereotypically appealing but does not necessarily provide a fully rounded account.

Website Growth

The level of MPs' activity online has expanded considerably over the last 18 months, by more than 50 per cent since the last available term of comparison.⁵⁶ 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 per cent 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 (that is, regularly updating) as opposed to a static cyber-pamphlet are still a relatively small minority perhaps around 15–20 per cent 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 towards 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 some 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 what one MP dismissively referred to as ‘template politics’.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ Within this generalised format there were minor examples of creeping individualisation. For example, some MPs now provide records of the Early Day Motions they sign, or present their own views on issues such as fox hunting. Overall, however, the technology alone, of course, does not create dissent. Dissenters do not have a monopoly on use of the technology, as the university tuition fees issue demonstrates. Websites and e-newsletters simply 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 refers to another possible future role – that of constituency-based policy representation.⁵⁹ In this case, Searing links this to the argument that rule changes in the Labour Party (deselection) might force MPs to act more as delegates for constituency activists. E-consultation could facilitate MPs in this sort of constituency-based policy representation. However, MPs using e-consultation are generally looking for wider legitimacy than just 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 and parliamentary cohort clearly play a role, gender or House of Commons position do not appear to make much difference. Additional, preliminary interview material suggests that skills/interest do play a key role. Certainly, MPs pushing the e-democracy and Internet agendas in parliament, such as Brian White, Richard Allan and Michael Fabricant, often have qualifications or a background in IT.⁶⁰ Interviews also confirmed that staff can sometimes have a key role in pushing ICTs in spite of the MP. One staff member 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.⁶¹

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'. Party philosophy, a strong symbolic attachment from relatively early period of the Internet and peer pressure amongst Liberal Democrat MPs may explain this.⁶² However, the idea of the Internet being of benefit to smaller party representatives *per se* did not apply. Indeed, the Northern Ireland party representatives were much less likely to have a web presence. In part, this is because Northern Ireland is a party system within a party system. So whilst they may be small parties at Westminster, they are all major players and have significant press coverage in Northern Ireland. Hence, the idea of incentives to use the Internet 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, for instance the recently revamped e-news, the increased reliance on Politico's as a provider of MPs' websites, and the customisable newsfeed from Conservatives.com. With regard to constituency factors, we again disagree with Jackson and argue that marginality, in terms of providing an incentive for MPs to create a web presence, does indeed matter. Locality also matters in 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' websites 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.⁶³

CONCLUSIONS

What we have seen so far in terms of MPs' online activities is largely a modernisation process rather than a 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. Existing participation and representation gaps are perhaps being exacerbated by ICTs. In the long term, one could legitimately ask whether it would actually make much difference even if MPs become more interactive, more professional and more accessible online. At the individual level, MPs may possibly use online technologies to boost their constituency profile and improve their constituency service. Here, email rather than websites is of greater assistance in allowing MPs to provide more regular and more in-depth information for voters. As the recent Hansard survey indicated, visibility of, and contact with, an MP tends to increase voter appreciation. Thus new technologies can provide an added extra to the traditional methods of communication. However, the idea of new technologies increasing MPs' collective worth or enhancing parliamentary institutions is more dubious. The technologies are unlikely to re-engage those who lack interest or mistrust the representative system and its 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.

NOTES

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 N. Jackson, 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 3/2 (2003), pp.124–37.
3. D. Judge, 'Representation in Westminster in the 1990s: The Ghost of Edmund Burke', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 5/1 (1998), pp.12–34.
4. D. Searing, *Westminster's World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
5. P. Norton, 'The Growth of the Constituency Role of the MP', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47/4 (1994), pp.705–20; P. Norton, 'Roles and Behaviour of British MPs', in W. Müller and T. Saalfeld (eds.), *Member of Parliament in Western Europe: Roles and Behaviour* (Harlow: Frank Cass, 1997), pp.17–31; P. Norton, 'The Individual Member in the British House of Commons: Facing Both Ways and Marching Forward', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 5/3–4 (1997), pp.53–74; P. Norton and D. Wood, *Back from Westminster* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993); D. Wood and J.-B. Yoon, 'Role Orientations of Junior British MPs: A Test of Searing's Categories with Emphasis on Constituency Activities', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 4/3 (1998), pp.52–71.
6. P. Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting under Blair* (London: Politico's, 2003); P. Cowley and M. Stuart, 'When Sheep Bark: The Parliamentary Labour Party since 2001', *British Elections and Parties Review*, Vol.14 (2004), pp.211–29.

7. In spring 2004 Jane Griffiths, MP for Reading East, became the first Labour MP to be deselected for more than a decade. Similarly, in 2004 Nick Hawkins, MP for Surrey Heath, was the first Conservative MP to be deselected for seven years.
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9. M. Rush and P. Giddins, 'Parliamentary Socialisation: The UK Experience', paper presented to the ECPR workshops, Turin, 22–27 March 2002.
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11. See, for example, Peter Mandelson, 'It May Be That the Era of Pure Representative Democracy is Slowly Coming to an End . . .', *The Guardian*, 16 March 1998, p.14.
12. A. Campbell, A. Harrop and B. Thompson, 'Towards the Virtual Parliament – What Computers can do for MPs', in S. Coleman, J. Taylor and W. van de Donk (eds.), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.26–41.
13. S. Coleman, *Democracy Online: What do we Want from MPs' Websites?* (London: Hansard Society, 2001).
14. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'Party Democracy Online: UK Parties and New ICTs', *Information, Communication and Society*, 3/2 (1999), pp.340–67; S. Ward and R. Gibson, 'Online and On-message? Candidate Websites in the 2001 General Election', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5/2 (2003).
15. C. Bellamy, 'Modelling Electronic Democracy: Towards Democratic Discourse in the Information Age', in J. Hoff, I. Horrocks and P. Tops (eds.), *Democratic Governance and New Technology* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.33–54; C. Bellamy and C. Raab, 'Electronic Democracy and the Mixed Polity: Symbiosis or Conflict?', in R. Gibson, A. Römmele and S. Ward (eds.), *Electronic Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.17–42.
16. I. Budge, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); S. Coleman, 'Cutting out the Middleman: From Virtual Representation to Direct Deliberation', in B. Hague and B. Loader (eds.), *Digital Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp.195–210.
17. P. Frissen, 'Representative Democracy and the Information Society – A Postmodern Perspective', *Information Polity*, 7/4 (2002), pp.175–84; D. Morris, *Vote.com* (Los Angeles, CA: Renaissance Books, 2000); C. Bellamy and C. Raab, 'Wiring up the Deckchairs?', in Coleman *et al.* (eds.), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet*, pp.156–72; Bellamy and Raab, 'Electronic Democracy and the Mixed Polity: Symbiosis or Conflict?', pp.17–42.
18. See, for example, D. Walker, 'MPs Off Message on Internet Revolution', *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. 2001; M. Tempest, 'MPs Find it's a Tangled Web', *The Guardian*, 31 Oct. 2001; S. Dodson, 'Falling Through the Net', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2004.
19. J. Perrone, 'Webbing up Westminster', *Annenberg Online Journalism Review*, 28 Feb. 2001; S.-Y. Uhm and R. Hague, 'Electronic Governance, Political Participation and Virtual Community: Korea and the UK Compared', paper presented to the European Consortium of Research Workshops, Grenoble 6–11 April 2001; Jackson, 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity', pp.124–37.
20. S. Coleman, 'Westminster in the Information Age', in Coleman *et al.* (eds.), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet*, pp.9–25; Jackson, 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity'.
21. Graham Allen MP, in S. Coleman (ed.), *Democracy Online: What do we Want from MPs' Websites?*
22. T. Steinberg, 'MPs' Websites', *Parliamentary IT Briefing*, 7 Nov. 2000; Ward and Gibson 'Online and On-message? Candidate Websites in the 2001 General Election'.
23. S. Coleman, 'Parliament in the Information Age: The Case of Westminster and Holyrood', in R. Gibson and S. Ward (eds.), *Reinvigorating Democracy: British Politics and the Internet* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp.67–80; C. Smith and P. Gray, 'The Scottish Parliament in the Information Age', in Coleman *et al.* (eds.), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet*.

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26. On this point see the criticisms of Michael Fabricant MP, *Government Computing* June 2004.
27. B. Bimber, 'Information and Political Engagement in America: The Search for Effect of Information Technology at the Individual Level', *Political Research Quarterly*, 54/1 (2001), pp.53–67; R. Gibson, W. Lusoli and S. Ward, 'Online Political Campaigning: The UK Public Responds', Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 1 Sept. 2002; P. Norris, *Digital Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
28. S. Childs, 'A Feminised Style of Politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6/1 (2004), pp.3–19.
29. J. Gulati, 'Members of Congress and Presentation of Self on the World Wide Web', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9/1 (2004), pp.22–40.
30. Jackson, 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity'.
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32. S. Ward, R. Gibson and P. Nixon, 'Political Parties and the Internet: An Overview', in R. Gibson, P. Nixon and S. Ward (eds.), *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* (London: Routledge, 2003).
33. S. Ward and W. Lusoli, 'Virtually Participating: A Survey of Online Party Members', *Information Polity*, 7/4 (2002), pp.199–216.
34. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'An Outsider's Medium? The Internet and the 1999 European Elections' (Harlow: Frank Cass, 2000), pp.199–214. Ward *et al.*, 'Political Parties and the Internet: An Overview'.
35. Campbell *et al.*, 'Towards the Virtual Parliament – What Computers can do for MPs', pp.26–41. To understand fully the influences of the parliamentary environment one would need to draw on comparative data that is beyond the scope of this article.
36. The additional sources included: 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 MP's 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.
37. 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>).
38. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'A Methodology for Measuring the Function and Effectiveness of Party Web-sites', *Social Science Computer Review*, 18/3 (2000), pp.301–19; Ward and Gibson, 'Online and On-message? Candidate Websites in the 2001 General Election'.
39. Found at <http://www.michaelportillo.co.uk/>.
40. The web-in-a-box system allows MPs with minimal web skills to create and maintain their own website at a minimum cost. Essentially, it provides a template with a standard design

- framework and certain common features, for example the side bar contains set of links to different aspects of the Labour Party's national website. Within this standard format the website can then be personalised by adding one's own information, for example personal biography/constituency information, photos and hypertext links.
41. All results reported on in this section are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.
 42. 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. MP interviews, currently in progress, will provide additional information on MPs' attitudes and resources.
 43. As MPs grow older after entering the House of Commons, 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 House of Commons rather than current age. We opt here for a more robust table nesting strategy.
 44. Results are based on a sub-sample of MPs, $n = 222$, extracted from the British Representation Study (BRS) 2001. The BRS is a survey of all parliamentary candidates standing for the major British parties in the 2001 general election, directed by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, and data is available from <http://www.pippanorris.com>.
 45. We note, however, that the composition of our population and the BRS sample is not very different in terms of age, gender, party affiliation and cohort.
 46. Jeffrey Donaldson MP had recently defected from the UUP to the DUP and his site was in the process of being overhauled.
 47. Cities of London & Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, Hampstead & Highgate and Kensington & Chelsea.
 48. 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>).
 49. Respectively found at [http://www.sheffieldhallam.org.uk/blog/\(Allan\)](http://www.sheffieldhallam.org.uk/blog/(Allan)), <http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/>, (Watson) [http://clivesoleymp.typepad.com/clive_soley_mp/\(Soley\)](http://clivesoleymp.typepad.com/clive_soley_mp/(Soley)) and <http://www.austinmitchell.org/>, (Mitchell).
 50. Found at <http://www.siobhainmcdonagh.org.uk>.
 51. Two other MPs, John McFall and Crispin Blunt, also took part in the Epolitix pilot project which ran from November 2003 to April 2004.
 52. Found at <http://www.stevewebb.org.uk>.
 53. For the sake of analytical clarity, centrality does not make a distinction between national party and House of Commons features, and it is used as an analytical counterpart to locality.
 54. We use here data for Labour MPs only, as dissent is best formulated theoretically as voting against the government. See Cowley and Stuart, 'When Sheep Bark: The Parliamentary Labour Party since 2001'. Several sources are available on MPs' rebellions; Phil Cowley provides an excellent overview at <http://www.revolts.co.uk>.
 55. W. Lusoli and S. Ward, 'Digital Rank-and-File: Party Activists' Perceptions and Use of the Internet', Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 28–31 August 2003, Philadelphia, PA, <http://www.esri.salford.ac.uk/ESRCResearch-project/output.html>.
 56. Jackson, 'MPs and Web Technologies: An Untapped Opportunity'.
 57. Interview with Conservative MP, Nov. 2003.
 58. Only around four per cent of valid sites failed to refer to party affiliation on the homepage.
 59. Searing, *Westminster's World*, p.384.
 60. White (Labour, Milton Keynes) and Allan (Liberal Democrat, Sheffield Hallam) are chairs of the all-party e-democracy group in the House of Commons. Fabricant (Conservative, Lichfield) is chair of the Information Select Committee
 61. Interview with authors March 2004.
 62. Uhm and Hague, 'Electronic Governance, Political Participation and Virtual Community: Korea and the UK Compared'.
 63. Interview with the authors, 10 March 2004.