

CONNECTING PARLIAMENT TO THE PUBLIC VIA THE INTERNET: TWO CASE STUDIES OF ONLINE CONSULTATIONS

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Twentieth-century mass media have been described as producing a 'one-way conversation' (Postman, 1986). Instead of dialogical deliberation, political communication has tended to be monological, professionally produced and released for public consumption as a marketing exercise. For most citizens political debate has come to be perceived as something to watch - or switch off. The noisy vivacity of political speech, characteristic of the ancient *agora* or the market square, assumes a distant and romantic quality, while *the* political speech, witnessed via the broadcast transmission of parliamentary theatre, is regarded as performance. The analogue broadcast media, whose microphones tend to empower professional communicators and their invited guests, turns political talk into *the political talk*: a non-interactive political discourse.

The prospect of using the inherent interactivity of the internet to enhance democracy has been raised by a number of scholars (Bentivegna, 1998, Hague and Loader, 1999, Coleman, 1999). In the early days of the internet cyber-democrats predicted that representative institutions would be radically transformed, or would even become obsolete, in the face of the public's capacity to state views and vote on issues that interested them (Becker and Slaton, 2000, Morris, 2001). More recently, there has been criticism of the simplistic connection between e-democracy and direct, plebiscitary democracy. Rather than regarding the internet as a means of transcending representative structures, it has been seen as a tool for refashioning and strengthening the hitherto weak and neglected relationship between representatives and represented (Coleman and Gotze, 2001).

This study examines one use of the internet to enhance representative democracy: the online parliamentary consultations conducted on behalf of the UK Parliament between 1998 and 2002. The study focuses particularly upon two online parliamentary consultations which can be seen to have generated different forms of public discussion. Four research hypotheses about the nature of online public deliberation are tested and some provisional conclusions are offered regarding the value of ICT as a connecting channel between elected representatives and citizens.

Parliament, the public and the space between them

A paradox of contemporary politics is that public access to Parliament has never been greater, but the mood of public remoteness and alienation from the formal democratic process has never been more acute.

Visitor-friendliness has never been a strong characteristic of the Westminster Parliament: visitors are referred to as 'strangers' and the building looks more like an impenetrable fortress than an inclusive democratic space. As a concession to greater openness, a visitors' centre was established in 2002. For those not able to visit Parliament in person, television cameras have had access to the House of Commons since 1989 (1985 for the House of Lords) and the new television studios at 4 Millbank provide permanent and intense coverage of the Westminster village. Since 1997 MPs have been expected to spend more time in their constituencies and it is now a requirement of political life to maintain regular contact with constituents via the local press, phone-ins, web sites and ever-increasing volumes of correspondence (including now email.) More than ever, voters judge their representatives by their visibility and transparency. Message development and public relations have become central to British politics; message impact now matters as much as policy and far more than

ideological consistency. With the management of public communication at the heart of democratic representation, accusations that representatives care more about how they are seen than what they actually do are frequently heard (Curtice et al., 1999).

Making Parliament and representatives more transparent has not resulted in greater public affection for them. The hopes of those who argued that televising the Commons would engender greater public respect for the work of MPs were sadly misplaced. While there are no signs at all of the public rejecting representative democracy *per se*, there is abundant evidence that the British public lack confidence in their elected representatives. According to poll data, three out of four members of the public do not trust politicians to tell the truth (MORI poll, 2000). In a fair and perceptive account of the contemporary culture of British politics, Jeremy Paxman observes that

In much of the popular mind, politicians are all the same. They're a bunch of egotistical, lying narcissists who sold their souls long ago and would auction their children tomorrow if they thought it would advance their career. They are selfish, manipulative, scheming, venal. The only feelings they care about are their own. They set out to climb the greasy pole so long ago that they had lost contact with reality by the time they were in their twenties. You cannot trust a word any politician says and if you shake hands with them, you ought to count your fingers afterwards (Paxman, 2002, p. 13).

To be relevant in a post-deferential, consumerist age, political institutions have to be seen to be listening. (Shops, banks and service providers are under precisely the same pressure.) Representation has become less a contractual matter of making and delivering promises and more an ongoing process of performance assessment, with citizens as permanent jurors rather than occasional voters. Responsiveness to the public matters more than ideological positioning. As Tony Blair well understood when he was elected in 1997, to govern effectively in a modern democracy, one should be seen as 'not the masters, but the servants of the people' (Blair, 1997).

Online parliamentary consultations: enhancing representative democracy?

Representative institutions are slowly adapting to the digital world. In 1996 the UK Parliament established its own web site. Although a highly informative resource, of particular value to journalists and those who already know their way around the parliamentary system, the site offers no opportunities for interactive communication between citizens and legislators.

The first experiments in using the internet to facilitate public input to the UK Parliament began in 1998. Between then and 2002 ten online consultations were run by or on behalf of Parliament. (see table i) Instead of simply creating a web forum and inviting the public to have its say, rather like an online phone-in programme, these consultations were designed to recruit participants with experience or expertise in relation to specific policy issues. The objectives of these online consultations were to

- gather informed evidence from the public to help parliamentarians understand policy issues;
- recruit citizens whose evidence might be unheard or neglected in the usual course of parliamentary evidence-taking;
- enable participants to interact and learn from with one another over an extended period of asynchronous discussion;
- enable participants to raise aspects of policies under discussion that might not otherwise have been considered;
- enable legislators to participate in the online discussion, raising questions and responding to citizens' comments, as time permits;

- derive a fair, independent summary of views raised which can constitute official evidence to Parliament

Table 1

YEAR	SUBJECT	COMMISSIONING BODY	CONDUCTED BY	ARCHIVED
1998	Data Protection Bill	Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST)	UKCOD and Hansard Society	
1999	Women in Science and Engineering	House of Lords Science & Technology Committee	POST and Hansard Society	
1999	E-democracy	Public Administration Select Committee	Hansard Society	http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/edemocracy.asp
2000	Domestic Violence	All-Party Domestic Violence Group	Hansard Society	http://212.133.53.182/womendiscuss/default.htm
2000	Family Tax credits	Social Security Select Committee	Hansard Society	http://www.uspeak.org.uk/default.htm
2001	Stem Cell Research	House of Lords Select Committee	Hansard Society and POST	http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/stem_cells/stemcells.htm
2001	Floods	POST	Hansard Society	http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/floodforum/floodforum.htm
2001	Parliamentary Information Strategy	Information Select Committee	Hansard Society	http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/information_select_committee/default.htm
2002	Long-term care of the elderly	All-Party Group for Older People	Hansard Society	http://www.seniorspeak.org/
2002	Draft Communications Bill	Joint Committee examining the draft Bill	Hansard Society and POST	http://www.commbill.net/

Research questions and methodology

The purpose of the research reported here was to test a number of assumptions about the nature and value of online deliberation. Ambitious normative aspirations have been associated with the potential of online public talk. It has been argued that the online environment could provide space for inclusive public discourse, which is a substantive prerequisite of democracy (Blumler and Coleman, 2001, Lenihan, 2002, Levine, 2001); that there is scope for generating and connecting online networks of interest and practice which would otherwise remain dispersed and disempowered by distance (Rheingold, 1994, Powazek, 2002); and that online interaction between representatives and represented can enrich mutual understanding and enhance public trust in representative democracy (Bimber, 1999, Coleman, 2003).

Critics of these claims argue, on the basis of political theory and empirical observation, that most online talk is bound to fall short of the normative standards set by deliberative theorists. Theoretical objections to deliberative democracy are based upon Lippmannesque assumptions about the scale and complexity of meaningful public deliberation being more than most citizens can be expected to cope with. Femia rejects what he sees as the idealistic assumptions of deliberative democrats; Peters, regards public communication itself to be over-rated in relation to more passive habits of listening (Femia, 1996, Peters, 1999).

Empirical observers of online public discussions have found that these tend to bear little relation to the rational norms of deliberative democracy. Hill and Hughes, who conducted research on political chat rooms, concluded that 'Chat rooms are a difficult format for thoughtful discussion. The short line space and the fast pace require people to make snap comments, not thoughtful ones' (Hill and Hughes, 1998, p. 130). Davis found, on the basis of his study of political Usenet groups, that 'In Usenet political discussions, people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other. The emphasis is not problem solving, but discussion dominance. Such behavior does not resemble deliberation and it does not encourage participation, particularly by the less politically interested' (Davis, 1999, p. 177). Wilhelm concluded from his research that 'The sorts of virtual political forum that were analysed do not provide viable sounding boards for signaling and thematizing issues to be processed by the political system' (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 102). These are strangely non-contextualised accounts of online discussion. Chat rooms and political party discussion lists during election campaigns are hardly appropriate places to seek the discursive characteristics of democratic deliberation. The environment and structure of communication has a significant effect upon its content; synchronous chat rooms and peer-generated Usenet groups are no more indicative of the scope for online public deliberation than loud, prejudiced and banal political arguments in crowded pubs are indicative of the breadth of offline political discussion.

On the basis of these claims and counter-claims, there are four hypotheses that were tested:

H1 – Online consultations provide a space for inclusive public deliberation.

H2 – Online consultations generate and connect networks of interest or practice.

H3 – Online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them.

H4 – Most online discussion is uninformed and of poor quality.

Two out of the ten UK parliamentary online consultations were used as case studies: the Womenspeak consultation on domestic violence, and the consultation on the draft Communications Bill. Both were set up, moderated and summarised by the Hansard Society, an independent, non-

partisan body.¹⁶ Womenspeak was commissioned by the All-Party Domestic Violence Group and was conducted in March 2000. The consultation on the draft Communications Bill occurred in May 2002, when a Joint Committee of MPs and peers was established to consider and report on this important piece of draft legislation. Pre-legislative scrutiny is a post-1997 innovation introduced by the Modernisation Select Committee with a view to enabling parliamentarians to examine draft legislation before the ink is dry on the final Bill. The Joint Committee introduced two important innovations into its proceedings:

- The public was able to see and hear all of its evidence sessions which were webcast live on Parliament's own site, <http://www.parliamentlive.tv>, and broadcast on BBC Parliament the following weekend.
- In order to gather a wider range of views on the draft Bill, the Committee commissioned an online forum, under the auspices of the Hansard Society and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, to accompany its formal evidence-taking.

The two consultations examined here contrasted in their purposes: the first was designed to enable women survivors of domestic violence to submit experiential testimony to a group of parliamentarians interested in developing policy; the second allowed the public to submit and discuss evidence for consideration by a committee of MPs and peers as part of the process of pre-legislative scrutiny.

Demographic profiles of participants in both consultations were produced by examining user registration forms. All messages in both consultations were analysed by a team of trained coders, using a frame designed to plot variables related to the four research hypotheses. A post-consultation survey was sent to participants in both consultations and face-to-face interviews were conducted with participating MPs and peers.

Inclusive consultation or 'the usual suspects'?

Identifying survivors of domestic violence and persuading them to participate in an online parliamentary consultation is far from simple. The Hansard Society recruited the participants for this consultation in partnership with Women's Aid, which has access to confidential numbers for a national network of refuges and outreach organisations. The Hansard Society's consultation outreach worker was able to locate local refuges, as well as women's groups and disability groups. In October and November 1999, five months before the consultation began, it was announced via flyers in Women's Aid newsletters. Other recruitment was conducted at a number of regional meetings across the UK. Most of the registration for the consultation was conducted face-to-face or by post.

The use of the internet as a medium for this sensitive consultation topic was the source of two problems: accessibility and security.

Many women who were enthusiastic about participating had no access to or familiarity with the internet. 52% of participants had no knowledge of using the internet before they took part. Most of the participants were able to go online using computers in refuges. This had several advantages: the personal and often distressing stories they had to tell could be recounted in friendly and familiar surroundings; there were trained workers to help them if they needed personal support during or after posting their messages; IT help was close at hand - 60% of the women reported needing help in getting to the consultation web site, and most of the time that was provided by refuge workers.

A second problem concerned security. Had the participants been invited to attend Parliament to tell their stories and express their views, few would have gone. Parliament is an intimidating place and

most women would not want their names recorded as witnesses. Many of the women thinking of participating in this consultation expressed concerns about the confidentiality of the online medium. This was particularly the case when they were sharing homes and/or computers with their abusers. In the consultation participants were given pseudonyms, assured that their real names (which were registered for purposes of authentication) would remain private and that the content of the online discussion would only be made available to other participants and the Hansard Society. According to the post-consultation survey, 85% of the participants felt that the web site was a safe and secure place.

The Womenspeak forum recorded an average of 1,574 hits per day. On average, 78 users visited the forum each weekday and 111 at weekends. 73% of the participants visited the site at least six times; 18% visited at least ten times. The average visitor session lasted 16 minutes and 31 seconds. 199 women registered and participated online, submitting 960 messages between them. Participants came from throughout England and Wales, with a demographically typical spread of ages and ethnic backgrounds. 10% of participants described themselves as being disabled; 6% were registered disabled.

Recruitment of participants for the draft Communications Bill consultation was much easier. The clerks of the Joint Committee were able to provide the Hansard Society with a list of potential participants, including organisations from which the committee would like to have heard evidence had there been more time. In addition, the Hansard Society, as an independent body, sought to recruit participants who were unknown to parliamentarians and could bring some very different perspectives to the consultation.

The consultation web site recorded 1,949 hits per day, the average duration of which were 17 minutes and 12 seconds. An average of 85 people visited the site each weekday and 55 at weekends. 373 people registered for this consultation, but, only 136 posted messages to the consultation forum. 222 messages were posted in all. Unlike the domestic violence consultation, where the emphasis was upon sharing experiences, discussion and mutual support, in this consultation there was a clear focus on influencing policy; most of those who registered were either more interested in what others had to say or else felt that they would not be able to influence policy. Typical comments from registered non-posters in the post-consultation survey were 'I preferred to watch the debate develop and take note of the points raised' and 'I did not submit a personal message mainly because I did not feel I knew enough about the topic, and time reasons.'

How politically engaged were these consultees? In the post-consultation surveys, participants were asked whether they had ever contacted an MP and whether they were members of political parties. 58% of Womenspeak participants had never been in contact with an MP; for the Communications Bill consultation only 38% had never contacted an MP. 96% of Womenspeak participants and 78% of the participants in the Communications Bill consultation were not members of political parties. So, for a majority of the participants there was no involvement in a political party, which is the usual point of entry to the policy process. And for a majority of Womenspeak participants and over a third of Communications Bill participants these online consultations constituted their first ever encounters with MPs.

Was it the case that participants in these consultations, while registering as individuals, were in fact representing interest groups? According to the post-consultation survey, 94% of the Womenspeak participants and 82% of the Communications Bill participants had no organisational affiliation related to the subject of the consultations.

The majority of participants in both consultations lived outside of London: 77.5% for Womenspeak and 63% for the Communications Bill consultation. In the case of Womenspeak, which included

many low-income participants and single mothers, the opportunity to take part in a parliamentary inquiry without travelling to London was a significant benefit. Although one might have expected Communications Bill consultees to be more able to visit Parliament in person, according to the post-consultation survey only 17% of registered participants ever attended Parliament to see the committee in session. (27% watched at least one webcast of the committee in session and 66% visited the committee's web site.) This suggests that interactions which would not otherwise have taken place were facilitated by the creation of a space for online consultation.

Creating and connecting online networks

The Womenspeak consultation lasted for one month. Many participants found the experience of interacting online with other survivors of domestic violence to be empowering. As the month went on, they began to use the forum to create an online community of mutual support, as well as engaging in a parliamentary consultation. Comments posted in the forum towards the end of the consultation indicated the extent to which a virtual community was being built:

It was brilliant; I felt really close to the participants during the consultation as if I were part of a giant support network.

I am just glad that you found out about this site before it closes at the end of next week. I hope you will see over the next week that none of us are alone. Love Sharon.

Emails, while enabling us to keep in touch, will not serve the purpose of contact the way this message board has. They will not enable the free flow of ideas and support that we have become used to. Thank you all for sharing your fears, frustrations and hopes for the future with me. Stay strong and stay safe.

Through this site I have built up so much strength by reading all your stories and I wish the best to every one out there and a big thank you to all that have worked tirelessly to get this site working every day. Let's hope this isn't the last.

Thank you to everyone involved in this discussion. Thank you to all of you who have become friends to me. I never imagined feeling this sad at the end of this. I will miss you all and hope it is not too long until we are in touch again. Take care and stay safe.

A majority of women (60%) reported in the post-consultation survey that the consultation helped them deal with their own experiences of domestic violence. As a result of networking online, some participants made contacts with one another in the offline world. In the post-consultation survey, 24% of participants reported making new contacts and 92% reported learning something new as a result of reading other participants' messages. Several of the participants were eager to continue the virtual network beyond the life of the parliamentary consultation and subsequently set up their own web site in which survivors' stories and views could be exchanged:

I have been surfing since my last post and have found a free message board. If it's suitable I will begin setting it up straight away. It runs on the same principle as this with registered passwords and we may be able to use the same ones we have now. I am really excited at the possibility that we could have the new one ready to go to when this one closes. I don't want us to lose any time to support each other and I am sure everyone feels the same as I do.

I am sending my details to Jeanine [the moderator]. I am asking her to give my email address to you. I live in Manchester but I would love to meet up, I'm only a train away. We will all definitely have to keep in touch. Thanks for being a pal this past month.

In the case of the Communications Bill consultation there were fewer signs of community-building, related to the markedly lower level of online interaction between contributors to this forum. Nonetheless, in the post-consultation survey, 72% of participants (including majorities of both message posters and non-posters) claimed to have learned something new from reading messages from other participants.

There was a significant contrast in the extent of interaction in the two consultations: in the Womenspeak forum over four-fifths (82%) of all messages were replies to previous messages; in the Communications Bill forum fewer than one in ten (8%) messages were replies to previous messages. This reflects the sociable, networking character of the former consultation, as opposed to the more advocative nature of the latter forum.

Representative-represented interaction

In the Womenspeak consultation forum 31 messages (3.2% of all) were contributed by six MPs. In the Communications Bill consultation forum 8 messages (3.6% of all messages) were contributed by 4 MPs and peers.

Despite the emphasis upon community-building in the Womenspeak forum, three-quarters of the participants reported that a major reason for taking part was the opportunity to interact with MPs. In the post-consultation survey, however, 68% of Womenspeak participants stated that they did not consider that the MPs who took part were interested in what they had to say and almost four out of ten (39%) were not satisfied with the contributions from MPs. Nonetheless, perhaps surprisingly, 94% of participants considered that the online consultation was a worthwhile exercise and 93% said that they would like to take part in future online consultations of this kind. This suggests that participants measured success in terms of group networking more than political interaction.

In the case of the Communications Bill consultation, a majority (53%) of participants were satisfied with the degree of involvement in the forum by members of the committee. One in four participants considered that the committee was interested in what they had to say; fewer than 3% disagreed and the majority were unsure. But 72% considered the online consultation to have been worthwhile, 91% were in favour of there being more online parliamentary consultations and 87% said that they would definitely be prepared to participate in future online consultations – with the other 13% saying that they would possibly do so.

These are mixed messages. Clearly, there was some concern amongst both groups of consultees about the extent of parliamentarians' interest in what they had to say. If an objective of online consultations is to increase public trust in politicians as good- listeners, the exercises reported here do not provide grounds for optimism.

The parliamentarians who participated in the Womenspeak consultation expressed enthusiasm about its expansive, deliberative nature of collecting evidence:

If you meet with a group in the constituency for 5-10 minutes you don't always have sufficient time to listen to all the problems. This was a unique experience because you were able to listen to a dialogue for an extensive period of time. (Linda Gilroy MP)

But the length of the process proved difficult to integrate into already crowded schedules:

I knew I had to do it because I had been asked to. But I had other commitments which I had to make time for as well. And my brief is actually Health ... I guess it was worthwhile, but it was hard to find time to do it. It coincided with other commitments. (Caroline Spelman MP)

With the internet format, people are used to immediate responses, but it does take time to change legislation. In that sense it isn't an equal participation; a lot of women had this as their number one priority, whereas MPs work on a huge amount of other issues. And with the time you have it is not realistic to expect MPs to read all the contributions. (Julia Drown MP)

Members of the committee examining the draft Communications Bill, from all parties, were enthusiastic about the exercise:

The online consultation worked exceptionally well, and proved its worth as a vital tool in the democratic process. I am sure future committees will find it as invaluable as we did. The responses were of a very high quality, and gave us a real sense of public opinion across a wide range of issues. We should promote future fora as aggressively as possible to maximise participation. Lord Puttnam, Chair of the Committee

It helped us change the questions we were asking the witnesses and made us focus on areas we would not necessarily have thought of. It tended either to reinforce something that we already knew or it changed questions that we would not otherwise asked. Brian White MP

It opens it up to a wider range of people to feed in ideas and opinions into the Parliamentary process. The fact that we were able to get ideas and opinions from the regions, particularly input on the importance of regional broadcasting, meant that the exercise was not restricted to Whitehall and Westminster. It allowed us to get on the road, electronically. The alternative would have been to hold a series of public meetings around the country. In my view, it was an advantage to the credibility of the committee and its work. One benefit of this consultation is reinforcing policies that are already well known and throwing up the concerns that may not previously have arisen. The argument against it is that you have to have the facility to participate in an online forum. Lord McNally

We thought it worked very well – it clearly was popular, we had very substantial response, we had very good information and we incorporated some of the points that came out from the online forum in our recommendations. Lord Crickhowell

Evidential quality

The purpose of Parliament consulting the experience and expertise of the public is to derive evidence that can inform and improve policy and legislation. Parliamentary inquiries have traditionally selected witnesses who are acknowledged experts, questioned them formally, minuted their evidence *verbatim* and used evidence so received to support their recommendations. From a parliamentary perspective, online consultations should fulfil the same purpose: the accumulation of high-quality evidence. Critics of online deliberation argue that empirically, citizens' behaviour in online discussions is rarely characterised by the lofty ideals of deliberative democracy, and theoretically, that most policy issues are too complex and time-consuming for the public to give them serious consideration, especially given the potentially overwhelming scale of mass public debate.

Assessing the quality of public deliberation is particularly problematic, involving sensitive normative standards. Nonetheless, attempts have been made to design methodologies for measuring the quality of stated opinions (Price and Neijens, 1997, Wayatt et al., 2000, Kuhn, 1991, Capella et al., 2002, Muhlberger, 2000). Three characteristics of deliberative quality were analysed in this

study: the extent to which messages were supported by external information; the frequency of message posting; and the level of interaction between messages and previous messages. Normatively, one might expect a deliberative discourse to include widespread use of external information sources; non-domination by a minority of frequent posters, to the exclusion of other, less articulate or sociable prospective participants; and high levels of interaction between agenda-setting messages and responses.

In submitting messages, participants could draw upon information from a number of external sources, including books, reports, newspaper articles and web sites, or upon self-referential information derived from personal experience. The use of external sources is commonly associated with the rational validation of evidence. In the Womenspeak consultation, one in three messages (32%) cited external sources of information. The fact that two-thirds of the messages did not go beyond personal testimony or opinion reflects the highly subjective nature of the experience of domestic violence. In the case of the Communications Bill consultation, nearly half of all messages (48%) referred to an external source, but fewer than one in ten (7%) drew upon personal, anecdotal experience. Insofar as rational argumentation is dependent upon external sources of support, beyond subjective experience, feelings or opinion, the majority of messages submitted to both consultations fell short of this standard, although a significant proportion of messages to both consultations were informed by external sources.

In the Womenspeak consultation most participants (52%) submitted only one message; 90% submitted fewer than ten messages; but 21% of all messages were submitted by just two participants and a third were submitted by just 11% of the participants. Frequent posters were much more likely to be agenda-setters than one-time posters: 18% of messages to the consultation were classified as 'seeds' (they started a new discussion thread); of these, most were submitted by the minority of participants who were frequent posters. In the Communications Bill consultation 82% of participants submitted only one message. There were very few frequent posters (4%) and these contributed fewer than one in ten messages.

Rafaeli defines interactivity as 'the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages' (Rafaeli, 1988). 82% of messages to Womenspeak responded in some way to a previous message in the forum. The extent of dialogue and information exchange in this forum was striking. In the Communications Bill consultation only 14% of messages were responses to preceding messages. Participants in this forum were less interested in discussing others' ideas than stating their own. The largest number of responses in the forum were to messages submitted by MPs.

Unlike the online discussions and chats analysed by Hill and Hughes, Davis and Wilhelm, the connection of these forums to constitutional legitimacy helped to generate a relatively high quality of deliberation. This is not surprising: public talk is intimately and dialectically related to broader relationships of power and place. It would be a mistake to assume from limited studies of informal, partisan online forums that all, or even most, online political discussion would be similarly banal and non-deliberative.

Conclusions from the case studies

An obvious conclusion from these studies is that not all online consultations are alike. Womenspeak was a relatively informal consultation designed to collect experiential evidence. The Communications Bill consultation was more closely connected to the legislative process and was part of a multimedia strategy for making this process more accessible to interested citizens. It would be a mistake to expect all online parliamentary consultations to perform the same functions or deliver the same results.

The first research hypothesis, that online consultations provide a space for inclusive public deliberation, is supported by the findings of both studies. Most participants in both of the consultations were not ‘the usual suspects’: party members, lobbyists or people who lived in or around the Westminster village. The voices heard in these consultation forums would probably not otherwise have been heard by parliamentarians. But there is no evidence that the internet, as a medium, is intrinsically inclusive. Public participation had to be actively promoted. In particular, the success of the Womenspeak consultation depended upon extensive outreach work, not least to overcome problems associated with the use of the internet as a democratic tool.

The second hypothesis, that online consultations generate and connect networks of interest or practice, is strongly supported by evidence from the Womenspeak consultation, where participants bonded so closely that several of them went on to set up their own community web site. In both consultations a majority of participants claimed to have learned something from other contributors, but, whereas in the Womenspeak consultation, the overwhelming majority of messages were responses to earlier messages, in the Communications Bill consultation there was little interaction between participants.

The third hypothesis, that online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them, is not supported by the findings from these studies. In the case of Womenspeak, many of the participants were dissatisfied with the contributions from MPs and were unconvinced at the end of the consultation that MPs had been interested in what they had to say. Participants in the Communications Bill consultation were more divided over these questions, but, on balance, most considered that the committee had been interested in what they had to say and that members of the committee had participated in a satisfactory way.

The fourth, critical hypothesis, that most online discussion is uninformed and of poor quality, is not supported by the findings from this study, although these findings are based upon elementary indicators of discursive quality. Significant proportions of messages to both consultations referred to external information; frequent posters did not dominate the discussion to the exclusion of others; and, in the case of the Womenspeak consultation, there was a high level of interactivity.

A connection waiting to be made?

British parliamentarians have expressed a good deal of enthusiasm about the potentiality of the internet as a democratic tool. Robin Cook MP, the Leader of the House of Commons, has stated that

There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors (Cook, 2002).

The House of Commons Information select committee has produced a comprehensive report entitled *Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public*, in which they have set out a number of recommendations for the conduct of future online consultations:

— the purpose and terms of the consultation should be made clear at the outset, both to those initiating the consultation and those participating in it. Consultations may range from a simple

invitation to submit views to a more deliberative and interactive debate including senior decision makers.

- it must be made clear to participants that they are not being asked to make policy but to inform the thinking of legislators;

- efforts need to be made to recruit participants, whether individuals or organisations, who can impart experience and expertise;

- special efforts are needed to make online consultations socially inclusive: these may include training in the necessary ICT skills and directions to public Internet access for participants;

- contributions to consultations need to be interpreted or summarised by an independent body or staff;

- a good consultation exercise will bring value to both the decision makers and the consultees. This can be tested through effective evaluation procedures, which should be built into each consultation proposal. These should be both quantitative and qualitative. Of particular value would be follow-up with a selection of both consultees and decision makers to assess the value of the consultation to them. The results of any evaluation should be produced in good time and made available to all participants;

- participants should receive feedback on the outcomes of the consultations.

In each case, the consultee should be given clear information on what they can expect, perhaps in the form of a "consultation contract" (House of Commons Information Committee, 2002).

These statements leave little doubt that an attempt is being made to use the internet as a democratic channel. But what sort of connection between Parliament and the public is envisaged here? At one level, this commitment can be regarded as a minor supplement to the traditional relationship between MPs and citizens: little more than a new delivery mechanism for public suggestions and correspondence. Indeed, parliamentary select committees have used web-based email boxes as correspondence channels for some time and this has hardly amounted to a strategy for reconnecting with the public.

For online consultations to be worthy of the kind of attention that politicians have been paying them, they must contribute to a quality of connection between representatives and the represented that can enrich democracy. What are the prerequisites for this to happen? How likely is such change to occur?

The behaviour of two principal sets of actors is central to a more transformative approach to e-democracy: parliamentarians and citizens. The former must integrate online interactivity into their routine activities and open their legislative and scrutiny processes to direct, deliberative public input which can be effectively moderated, filtered and summarised as evidence. Citizens must regard the internet as an accessible and usable medium which can facilitate an authentic and worthwhile connection with their representatives. Parliamentarians must not be allowed to regard online consultation as a mere gesture towards techno-modernity, a publicity opportunity or a one-way suggestion box. Citizens should not be given the impression that online consultation is a free-for-all rantfest, a virtual surgery for raising personal problems or a technopopulist experiment in direct democracy. A key to the success of online consultations is the clarification of actors' rights and responsibilities and the honest management of their expectations.

For most MPs, the most effective connection with the citizens they represent is in a face-to-face context or through paper correspondence. In a recent survey of UK MPs, Scottish MSPs, Welsh AMs and Northern Irish MLAs, most preferred paper mail to email and in all four legislatures there was a clear view that email correspondence was of inferior quality to posted letters (Coleman, 2002). Many MPs are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the online medium and are concerned about the dangers of email overload, authentication of senders and maintaining constituency links within the borderless environment of cyberspace.

Integrating online activities into MPs' working practices is key to the future success of online consultations. Richard Allan MP, when interviewed about the Communications Bill consultation, observed that

Time management is at the heart of everything. If we do not crack the question of our working arrangements, if we do not sit down and look at how do we prioritise our time - does it need to change, should it be different in 2002, from how it was in 1952 – then I am not sure we will take full advantage of opportunities like this. Our workload in all the other areas is not decreasing but increasing and that is the biggest problem of it all. You cannot fit more in to a working day unless you change the whole culture or put the extra resources. The difficulty for MPs who are asked to participate in an online consultation is to balance between new consultation methods, like this, and the traditional ones. (Interview with Richard Allan MP, 2002)

Brian White MP, who was a member of the Joint Committee examining the draft Communications Bill, commented that

The problem was that we needed somebody to facilitate the online consultation - someone like the Hansard Society - to act as intermediary.

As a committee member you just could not look through the forum and do everything else. It was all right this time because there was just one consultation running and therefore the Hansard Society was giving all the support they could. If there were several online consultations running at the same time, that could be a problem in the future.

Time management is crucial. One of the problems was that we had such a tight deadline: we could only have four weeks of the online forum. I would contribute more had I had more time. What would be ideal is to have a forum for a couple of weeks before the committee gets up and running and then you could start to use some of that evidence when the committee decides the way it wants to work. If you have consultation up and running before the committee takes on board whatever they are going to look at, you could actually have much more wide-ranging discussions on some of the principles. (Interview with Brian White MP, 2002)

The Information Committee report declared that 'The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House' (House of Commons Information Committee, 2002), but there is a significant distinction, in everyday practice, between wishing to be transparent (i.e. observable by the public) and accessible (i.e. reached by the public.) Changing MPs' working practices, so that online interaction with represented citizens is as much a routine activity as briefing the local press or attending constituency events, is not easily achieved. Unless politicians have confidence in digital media, both technically and politically, they are unlikely to use them – and unless politicians are not committed to meaningful interactivity with the public, citizens are likely to regard online consultations as a frustrating one-way dialogue. Just as politicians took time to understand the benefits of engaging with radio and television, and only derived significant benefits once they approached these media seriously and strategically, they must now learn to regard the online media as more than a channel for replicating offline practices.

According to Schumpeter's famous trilogy of invention-innovation-diffusion, organisations respond to new technologies in three stages: first, they use them to automate existing processes; then they begin to recognise opportunities for more efficient working; and finally, they re-engineer themselves around the benefits of the technology (Schumpeter, 1976). The Westminster Parliament is just about at the first stage, with a few *avante garde* MPs having reached the second. If the third

stage is conceived in technocratic terms, it is unlikely to be seen as desirable, but, if it is integrated into a broader programme of procedural and cultural parliamentary modernisation, one could envisage a radical role for ICT in the re-engineering of parliamentary communication. Central to this transformative potential is the capacity of online consultations to transcend barriers of distance; to promote asynchronous discussion which can be stored, retrieved and archived; and to build linkages between public experience and expertise and legislative deliberation and scrutiny.

Just as MPs must see the benefit of going online, so must citizens. The case studies reported here found much support from citizens for online consultations, but this might reflect little more than enthusiasm for an agreeable novelty. If such experimental exercises are to become a routine and trusted part of the democratic process, the public will expect them to be professionally produced and managed, and to result in a two-way dialogue which has some discernible effect on policy.

High production standards are not typically associated with the online communication environment. An image of amateurishness and anarchy prevails across much online activity, but neither of these characteristics are compatible with a sustainable strategy for interactive parliamentary communication. Badly designed web forums, using inappropriate discussion software, will soon frustrate users. An absence of agreed rules of discussion could easily result in an online bear garden, dominated by the noisiest and least sensitive few. Just as televised studio discussions and radio phone-ins depend upon professional production techniques, online consultation requires preparation, recruitment, design and moderation. The role of the moderator as virtual chair, impartial facilitator and technical administrator is of key importance (The Hansard Society, 2003). For online consultation to become routine, trusted spaces of public deliberation need to be created, promoted, managed and evaluated, both in terms of their democratic and media values (Blumler and Coleman, 2001).

Professionalisation should not be at the expense of authentic connectivity. The unique benefit to be gained by citizens in using the internet as a democratic tool is interactivity and a more responsive relationship with representatives. For online consultations to be seen as more than a gesture, there must be tangible evidence that MPs are interacting with the public and taking views of online contributors into account in their deliberations. As we saw from our case studies, MPs who have participated in online consultations so far have felt under pressure to be seen to be interacting and have not always satisfied participants' expectations. MPs tend to argue that the public's expectations need to be 'managed', but it is likely that, as with other forms of media participation, such as phone-ins, politicians would be unwise to participate unless they are prepared to be judged on the basis of their performances.

Citizens participate in politics – whether online or offline, deliberatively or aggregatively – in pursuit of benefits. The ultimate test of value for an online consultation is whether it contributes to making better policy and legislation. In accordance with the norms of representative governance, citizens seem to be content to inform policy and law-makers rather than make policy and law themselves; but they do expect their representatives to be responsive to their input. In the online parliamentary consultations considered here, there are indications that consultees influenced policy; in the case of Womenspeak, a summary of the consultation was presented to the Minister for Women, Tessa Jowell, and the chair of the All-Party Group on Domestic Violence, Margaret Moran MP, has raised issues from the consultation in parliamentary questions to the Prime Minister and other Ministers. Some of the evidence given in the online consultation appears to have raised Government concerns about child contact arrangements where there are violent fathers. It is hard to resist the conclusion that some of the powerful experiences related by women, particularly about the effects of domestic violence upon their children, will do more to stimulate policy action in this area than traditional campaigning could have done. According to Brian White MP who was a member of the committee, the online consultation on the draft Communications Bill 'changed the report we

wrote. We can say that the report would have been different had it not been for the online consultation.’

Online consultations are not, and will not become, a panacea for disconnection between politicians and citizens, but they do have the potential to support a more direct form of representation (in contradistinction to direct democracy) in which the public is likely to feel less unheard.

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