

## **Interacting and Representing: can Web 2.0 enhance the roles of an MP?**

Darren G. Lilleker & Nigel A. Jackson

In its recent report, the House of Commons Modernisation Committee (2007: 3) noted that “there is no neat job description for a member of parliament.” As a result, and particularly over the last few decades, the role each individual MP chooses to play is constantly evolving as a response to political, economic, social and technological factors. The House of Commons Modernisation Committee (2007) conducted its report into the back bench role of an MP, precisely because of the concern that there is an imbalance in the tasks MPs conduct, as constituents have become more demanding in the past thirty years. For example, Hansard Society (2007) research of the 2005 cohort found that nearly half of their time was spent on constituency activity. The possible cause for this refocusing of priorities is argued to have resulted from a bottom-up demand for interaction. At the same time, the Communications Allowance was introduced in recognition that the House of Commons collectively, and individual MPs, needed to put more effort into communicating with the public (Members Estimate Committee 2007). Indeed, the Members Estimate Committee noted that technology provided new opportunities for interaction. It is set against this context that we consider the potential impact of the Internet on how MPs interact with, and represent, their constituents.

A number of early optimists suggested that Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) could create participatory democracy, potentially making the role of Parliament and individual MPs obsolete (Toffler 1980, Naisbett 1991, Rheingold 1993), but this has not been the reality. Rather, the Internet has gradually enhanced the ability to communicate with a range of audiences using a variety of methods, and so may have the capacity for enhancing representative democracy. The first MPs’ website was created in 1994, the first weblog in 2003 and since the 2005 General Election a significant number of MPs have created a presence on social networking sites (SNS). MPs received guidance in how to use websites (Steinberg 2001), in what is now referred to as Web 1.0 applications, but whilst they have yet to receive any guidance on how to use Web 2.0 applications such as weblogs and SNS, such tools have proved increasingly popular. Several MPs have a foothold within a Web 2.0 environment. While not intrinsically true of all weblogs, some, such as Tom Watson (Lab) or John Redwood (Cons) invest energy and resources writing interactive blogs which have their own regular readership, and attract debate. While more about sharing artefacts than ideas, posting of videos to YouTube or pictures to Flickr, both have some popularity; especially

during campaigns. Equally, some MPs have joined virtual communities, and so created their own space within SNS such as Facebook, Bebo or MySpace, and some such as Steve Webb (Lib Dem) are on all three. Cumulatively, this indicates that they are clearly exploring new means of promoting themselves and their politics, as well as a minority who seem to be developing new means of interacting with their constituents or those who share their political interests (Williamson, 2009).

The key aspect of Web 2.0 technology that offers potential (as well as possible problems) for MPs is that of an architecture of participation (O'Reilly 2005) where those with Internet access can interact with one another. Apart from the Webmaster, there is no automatic hierarchy within communities and so each page of a community site is shaped by its members, suggesting that participation can lead to co-production of content. In sharp contrast to the 'we will build it and they will come' philosophy associated with Web 1.0 applications such as static websites; Web 2.0 users work on a 'we will come and build it philosophy' (Birdsall, 2007). MPs, in using this technology, will be encouraged to relinquish some control over their public presentation in order to engage with community members. What is interesting for MPs is the implication for those who might visit their online communities, namely constituents. Research suggests that most members of online communities have 'latent ties' (Haythornwaite 2005), in other words, they know one another offline as well. Typically such communities make reference to shared offline experiences, and upload photographs showing community members together; hence SNS can add value to already existing offline experiences. We suggest that separately, and combined, weblogs and SNS provide MPs with an opportunity to engage in dialogue with constituents. It is worth noting, however, SNS are considered to have more potential for encouraging interactivity than weblogs (Phillips 2007). This paper asks to what extent interaction within Web 2.0 applications is taking place; what functions of an MP's role are enhanced through the use of Web 2.0; and concludes by focusing on the advantages and disadvantages for MPs of pursuing a Web 2.0 strategy.

### **The representative role of MPs**

Literature identifies four main roles that MPs play: *delegate*; *trustee*; *partisan*; and *constituency service* each of which can be significant or minor within the MP's overall workload balance. Delegates are required to identify the views of their constituents (or a particular section of them), and are therefore mandated to vote accordingly. Arblaster (2002)

notes that an MP who is a *delegate* is an agent of a particular interest (be it the constituency as a whole or a part of it, or indeed an interest beyond the constituency such as MPs sponsored by Trade Unions or who have open affiliations with specific causes). Interaction between the MP and such an interest is central to this role, as the MP needs to identify the views of whatever interest they represent. Traditionally, MPs will have used private and public meetings and their postbag to assess the opinion of those they represent. This role is considered to be obsolete, largely because of the difficulty of identifying the views of their constituents. However, the Internet opens up a practical means for MPs to identify what their constituents think, and respond accordingly. If MPs are using the Internet as *delegates* we would expect to find them asking online constituents their views through questionnaires, discussion fora and email, and then voting in line with the consensus.

The notion of the *delegate* role was very much influenced by sixteenth and seventeenth century thinkers such as John Locke or the Levellers (Arblaster 2002), however, this became surpassed as the *trustee* view evolved in the eighteenth century where MPs were perceived as having a significant influence on the legislative process (Rush 2001). The *trustee* role, sometimes referred to as the Burkean tradition, ascribes to the MP a degree of independence as a maker of legislation. Each MP's obligation is to the consideration of national, not local, issues (Pickles 1971). In order to be able to judge a decision for its impact on the nation as a whole, MPs were expected to be financially independent so that they were not beholden to a particular interest. As the impact of MPs on initiating legislation declined, then so did that of the *trustee* role. Ferber *et al.* (2007) suggest that the Internet would affect the Burkean approach because this communication channel would interfere with the independence of MPs by giving interests access to them. An alternative view, however, is that the Internet could be an additional means by which MPs can promote their opinions. The difference between these two views can be explained by whether Web 2.0 applications encourage only top-down communication aimed at informing visitors to the site or also bottom-up with a more participatory form of open dialogue among visitors and between the host and site visitors. Whilst historically the *delegate* and *trustee* roles have been viewed as adversarial, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between these two roles is more complex; it can be issue driven where on some issues MPs will follow the direction of constituents, equally a range of factors can drive whether an MP is able to be a *trustee*, particularly more recent perspectives on the MP's role with talk of competition to independence coming from both the party and the constituency. Wahlke *et al.* (1962) suggest the two concepts are not mutually

exclusive, rather MPs can act as both a *trustee* and a *delegate* as circumstances and issues require.

As hinted at above, from the middle of the nineteenth century, these two models were challenged by a third: the party or *partisan* role as the party apparatus, both within and outside of Parliament, began to play a greater role in the development and presentation of policy, and who actually got selected to stand for and so get elected to Parliament. The *partisan* role is now considered the dominant model because party controls the selection and deselection process of an MP, determines the likelihood of candidates being elected and once elected will shape a Member's political opportunities (Norton and Wood 1990, Coxall and Robins 1998, Judge 1999); equally the Whip system is designed to allow the party to exert control over the voting of MPs on legislation within the House of Commons when there is a specific party line. Norton (2007) suggests that this party model best explains the use of the Internet by MPs, but we note that he analysed only Web 1.0 applications. If MP's Web 2.0 presence is designed primarily to promote a *partisan* model, it would seek to promote their party's image, policy and activity at both a national and local level, whilst also eschewing any move towards acting as a delegate as voting decisions are more likely to be dominated by the party line.

More recently, a fourth model has been proposed, that of *constituency service* (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). This focuses on the gradual growth since the 1960s of the *constituency* role (Marsh 1985, Norton 1994), which many MPs suggest is now their most important role (Power 1998, Rush 2001). With limited opportunities to influence national policy, it has been suggested (Norton 1994) MPs have sought to identify areas where they can justify a niche role. Within the *constituency* role, MPs seek to address individual constituents' grievances and speak on behalf of the constituency as a whole (Searing 1994). This role is argued to be the top priority across Westminster, however, is especially a key aspect of any MP in a marginal seat who wishes to build up their personal vote and incumbency factor in between elections (Cain *et al.* 1987, Lilleker, 2005). The *constituency* role encourages more MPs to prioritise their contact with constituents, both individually and with groups; though this does not suggest always returning to a delegative mode of behaviour this would blur the boundaries between *trustee* and *delegate* further. If MPs are using Web 2.0 to further the *constituency* role we would expect them to use it to help them identify local

issues, but Web 2.0 could also help enhance a sense of community and belonging to the constituency.

In rejecting the *delegate* role, Sir Winston Churchill (1955: 302) made clear that he felt that the other three models was where an MPs' duties lay, and moreover, he was clear about the order of priority of these three models.

The first duty of a member of parliament is to do what he thinks in his faithful and disinterested judgement is right and necessary for the honour and safety of Great Britain. His second duty is to constituents of who he is the representative but not the delegate...It is only in the third place that his duty to party organisation or programme take rank. All these loyalties should be observed, but there is no doubt of the order in which they stand under any healthy manifestation of democracy.

We suggest, however, that the order of priorities does not remain as Churchill noted, rather that different pressures, both internal and external, gradually change the roles an MP plays and how they relate vis-à-vis each other. Norton (1994) identified a number of factors which has influenced MPs' roles in recent years with Rush (2001) noting that 68% of MPs, across all parties, placed the constituency first with nation and party being a distant second and third respectively. However, we suggest that Norton omitted one factor, technology, that factor is currently playing a role in the development of representative democracy, and so could be re-orienting again the priorities of British MPs.

### **MPs, interactivity and the Internet**

In order to conduct whatever roles they choose, MPs have to communicate to key audiences such as party colleagues, other parliamentarians, the media, pressure groups, constituents and the wider public. Such communication can be either a dialogue which seeks to encourage feedback from the recipient, or a monologue where the recipient of the message is assumed by the MP to be passive. In reality, MPs are likely to use a mixture of both approaches. MPs are largely interactive in public and private meetings and through letters and telephone calls. Such interactive communication is frequently to a small number of individuals or constituents, when MPs generally seek to reach a wider audience they tend to rely on monologic communication such as hand-delivered newsletters (Allan 2006), and media relations (Franklyn and Richardson 2002, Lilleker and Negrine 2003). This implies that whilst the role an MP is conducting influences the nature of the communication so does the number of recipients to the message. As both a broadcast and a narrowcast technology, the

Internet enables MPs to enter into either dialogue or monologue depending on how they use the Internet and who the intended recipients are.

The evidence, thus far, is that MPs have largely relied on Web 1.0 applications, such as websites as a one-way, top-down monologue in the form of an electronic brochure to enable them to promote their views (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). This use of websites, broadly supports a *trustee* approach, and there is little evidence that MPs have sought to use their websites to encourage interaction (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Allan 2006, Vincente-Merina 2007). For example, two separate studies both suggest only 8% of MPs' websites used interactive tools such as surveys (Ward and Lusoli 2005, Goodchild *et al.* 2007). Similarly, with e-newsletters the evidence is that most MPs do not use them as interactive tools, rather most use them as a broadcast medium (Jackson 2006). As a result, the actual impact of the use of Web 1.0 by MPs has been at the margins, not the core, of the concept of representation. However, Jackson (2003) has suggested that websites may be enhancing MP's constituency and partisan roles, in terms of how they reach constituents and promote their parties. Furthermore, Ward and Lusoli (2005) suggest that websites may be modernising the representative process and so making MPs more efficient communicators. What remains clear, however, is that the Internet is not necessarily fundamentally altering political representation; indeed Web 1.0 applications appear to have helped make MPs more efficient, but have not fundamentally altered how and why they communicate.

It is argued, however, that Web 2.0 applications may fundamentally alter how MPs communicate by changing the nature of how MPs and their constituents interact. Colville (2008) suggests that:

By inhabiting the same online spaces as their constituents on a day-to-day basis MPs will interact with them in much more normal conditions – when the MP is not the privileged voice of authority, but merely one member of a conversation among many.

Yet, the level of interactivity of MPs' weblogs, the one Web 2.0 modality where we have empirical research, is not much better than that of Web 1.0 applications. Rather, weblogs have been largely top-down with limited evidence of real dialogue (Auty 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006, Francoli and Ward 2008). Whilst there are individual exceptions who do specially respond to comments left by visitors, most do not appear to (Jackson 2008a). Auty (2005) identifies a blag/blog balance, between those weblogs designed as one-way monologues to promote the MPs views (blag), and those which seek to encourage a dialogue

(blog). Auty suggests that this blag/blog balance appears weighted towards being a blag and so weblogs are seen as another means for MPs to have their say, and so supporting the *trustee* role; thus it is argued 'politics as usual' dominates.

## **Methodology**

This exploratory research seeks to answer three specific questions:

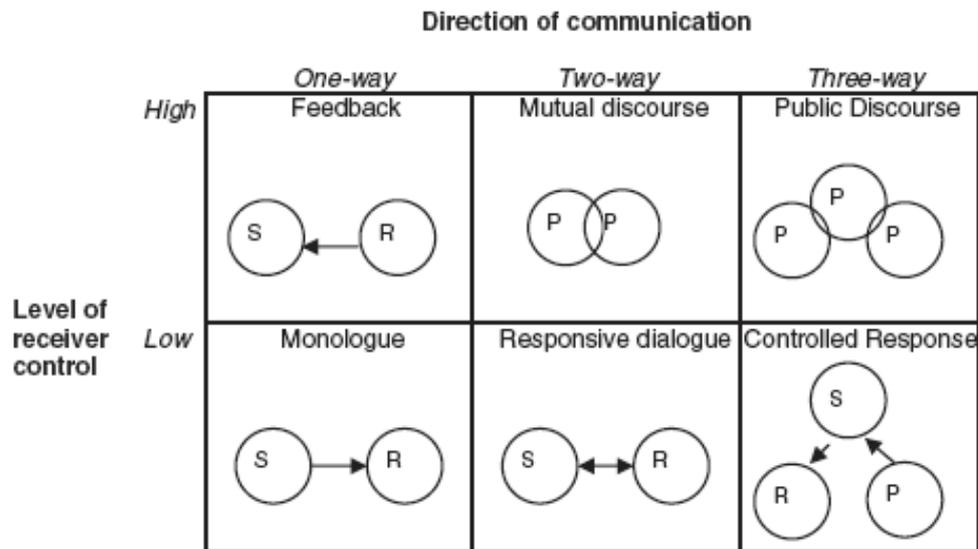
- 1) To identify the extent to which public conversations are taking place in MP's Web 2.0 presence;
- 2) To assess the extent of interactivity taking place in MP's Web 2.0 presence;
- 3) To identify whether MPs use weblogs and social networking sites within either a *delegate, trustee, party or constituency service* model of representation.

A content analysis of MP's weblogs and SNS presences was conducted in May 2008. MP's weblogs were identified by accessing all MPs websites via the official Parliament website, [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk). The only weblogs and SNS presences included in our analysis were those linked to from official websites; our focus, therefore, was on sites MPs promoted, if they were not promoting them, we suggest they would have limited reach and value.

We identified 37 examples of MPs using SNS, which actually represents 26 MPs as nine had a presence on more than one SNS. Thus only 4% of MPs have a social media presence. We originally identified 52 MPs claiming to have a weblog, which would suggest a small but steady increase on the 39 from January 2007 (Francoli & Ward 2008). However, in reality only 42 weblogs were assessed to be sticky (Jackson 2003), the rest were considered to be 'cobwebs' <sup>(1)</sup>, and so dormant.

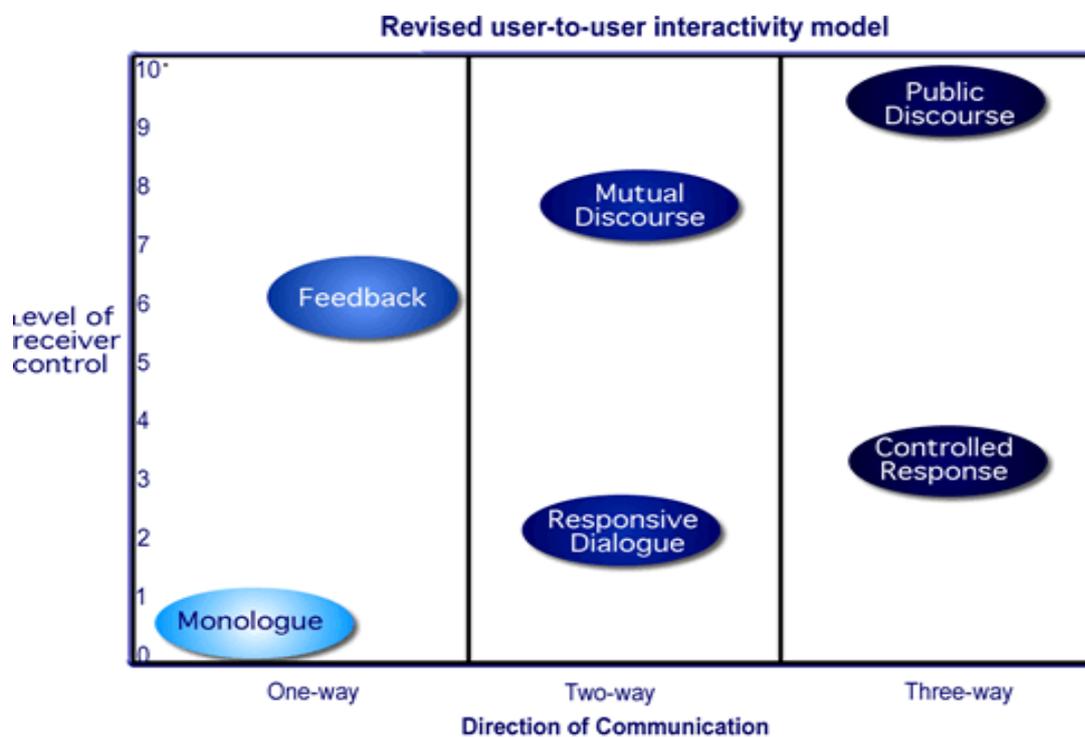
In order to assess the interactivity of MP's SNS and weblogs we used the Ferber *et al.* (2007) model. Building on the 2002 McMillan user-to-document and user-to-user interactivity model, and enhancing Grunig and Hunt's (1984) one and two-way model, they suggested that a three-way model exists where public deliberation takes place. This implies that feedback alone is not enough to be defined as interactive, rather any conversation needs to take place in a public forum. Ferber *et al.* (Figure 1) suggest that a three-way model of communication is more appropriate to encourage interaction online.

**Figure 1: Six-part model of Cyber Interactivity** (Adapted from Ferber *et al.* 2007)



The use of Web 2.0 tools will be assessed in relation to the Ferber *et al.* 2007 six-part model of cyber-interactivity as operationalised by Lilleker and Malagon (forthcoming) in figure 2. Using this model it is possible to not only assess where within the six part model any given piece of Internet communication rests, but also to assess whether the MP is seeking to control the content, or enable users to have an input.

**Figure 2: Operational Model for Web 2.0 analysis** (adapted from Ferber *et al.* 2007)



The way in which the assessments are made is outlined in table 1, all identified weblogs and SNS presences were analysed and classified, with a sample analysed by both researchers to ensure intercoder reliability, with the outcome being 100% following minor revisions to the classifications.

**Table 1: Scale for measuring levels of receiver control**

Category	Scale	Definition
<b>Low Receiver Control</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>One-way hyperlink with unclear destination</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>One-way hyperlink with defined destination</b>
	<b>3</b>	<b>Hyperlinks created with user input, language is dynamic using second person</b>
	<b>4</b>	<b>User has control over read and link options, video play is optional, content can be downloaded</b>
	<b>5</b>	<b>Users have control over interfacing with content (above) and can send information</b>
<b>High Receiver Control</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Users can send and receive information. i.e. debate forums</b>
	<b>7</b>	<b>Users have multiple options to send and receive information, their input has transformational power – can be seen. i.e. text only chat.</b>
	<b>8</b>	<b>Users can upload content, questions, including videos, and can receive answers from receivers</b>
	<b>9</b>	<b>User can choose time, type and amount of information sent and received, the information sent is transformed by the receiver and the transformation is transparent. Communication is asymmetrical</b>
	<b>10</b>	<b>Sender and receiver have equal levels of control, communication is conversational</b>

Based on the literature discussed above, table 2 explains the coding sheet used to identify how the four representative models relate to MPs’ use of weblogs and SNS.

**Table 2 Representative model**

<b>Model/Feature</b>	<b>Measure</b>
<b>Delegate</b>	
Access to constituents only	Yes/No
Seek to identify what constituents think of key issues	Yes/No
Surveys	Yes/No
Discussion forum	Yes/No
Opinion polls	Yes/No
Encourage one-to-one communication	Yes/No
<b>Trustee</b>	
Press releases	Yes/No
Promotes media coverage secured	Yes/No
Promotes speeches given	Yes/No
Promotes public meetings	Yes/No
Promotes personal campaigns	Yes/No

<b>Party</b>	
Promotes party policy	Yes/No
Promotes local party activity	Yes/No
Promotes national party activity	Yes/No
Encourages party membership/support	Yes/No
Promotes party election campaigns	Yes/No
Uses content provided by national party	Yes/No
<b>Constituency Service</b>	
Refers to casework/constituents	Yes/No
Speaks for constituency*	Yes/No
Seeks views on local issues	Yes/No
Seeks views on national issues	Yes/No
Provides local information	Yes/No
Promotes local community activity**	Yes/No

\* Speaking for the constituency includes highlighting social and economic issues which affect all or significant parts of the constituency

\*\* For example, highlighting local non-partisan events and organisations

### **MPs use of Web 2.0 tools and features: public conversations?**

An initial assessment of how MPs use Web 2.0 tools and features suggests that an architecture of participation (O'Reilly 2005) has been created. This is consistent with the evidence for how political parties have used Web 2.0 applications (Lilleker & Jackson f/c). However, a closer consideration of the data (table 3) suggests a more complex analysis, as not all features are used. Interaction is more likely to be with or within the site, not with the actual MP. Visitors can search over half the presences; follow a range of enmeshed links, usually to main party sites; view photographs and RSS feeds and follow links; they can also share information with their own networks (such as their friends on Facebook). Yet, very few sites seem to ask for direct feedback from visitors using questionnaires, polls or petitions. Only one MP actively allows visitors themselves to post such tools. Many MPs encourage a form of interaction, but not necessarily public interaction where they defend their views or debate issues in an open forum. Visitors can contact the host privately as most weblogs or SNS provide contact details, or they can be contacted via the site messaging service. For example, Rob Marris (Lab) made eight separate posts on his weblogs covering different topics during the month studied, and despite offering a comment facility, not one posts leads to a response from a visitor. Yet it is quite likely that individual constituents or local journalists (several posts were based on press releases) may have responded via other media. Therefore, although a majority of MPs do not necessarily overtly encourage it, within Web 2.0 applications some form of public interaction is unavoidable.

The majority of weblogs allow comments, meaning any visitor can react to the hosts' post or make any comment they choose. Typically such comments on weblogs might be of a partisan nature, either acting as a cheerleader or heckler depending on whether the person commenting supported the MP's party. 'Yah boo sucks' politics seems to be a feature of Web 2.0 politics. For example, when Ed Vaizey (Cons) was attacking the closure of local Post Offices, two of the three responses supported him by attacking the Labour Party with some vitriol, for example, Sharon Morgan states "Words fail me with regards this Government. It seems the only people it cares about are the thieving MPs...this must be the worst Labour Government in history." Some were a little bit more subtle. When Anne Snelgrove (Lab) posted on her work on behalf of a constituent caught up in the Farepak crisis, Bill Murphy stated "I would like to thank Anne for her work on Farepak. Although I was not personally affected by the incident I think Anne's leadership throughout deserves recognition." This comment appears to have been made by a neutral, but in all likelihood they may not have been. And even if, in this case, Bill Murphy is indeed neutral with no link to the MP, weblogs are as Jackson (2008b) showed open to such manipulation through the use of sock-puppets<sup>(2)</sup>. However, not all comments on weblogs are of a partisan nature. For example, when Richard Spring (Cons) pointed out the unpopularity of Gordon Brown, 'Curly' whilst broadly agreeing with Spring, did warn that the 10p tax rate issue was also a warning sign for the Conservatives. SNS equally allow comments and postings by visitors or those who are added as friends by the MP. Within Web 2.0, some form of public participation is virtually impossible for MPs to ignore.

Social networking presences tend, on the whole, to get more simplistic comments such as the raft of good luck messages to now Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg on his campaign to take over from Ming Campbell, or indeed happy birthday messages to Campbell himself. However, some MPs do received messages of more substance; Liberal Democrat Jo Swinson uses her status to raise debates and has had conversation with visitors to her site on the party's economic policy, industry regulations on reporting food ingredients as well as the weighty topic of whether chocolate is good for you. Cumulatively this demonstrates she has an audience who are willing to engage on a range of issues, but also that she must also respond to maintain momentum; however as this makes her appear highly interactive to other casual visitors to her publicly open profile; hence Web 2.0 is not only about individual conversations, but also offering an impression of the MP to a wider community.

**Table 3: Frequency of use of Web 2.0 tools and features on weblogs and social networking sites**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Number using feature</b>	<b>%</b>
Contact details	57	73.1
Search Engine	41	52.6
Enmeshing	26	33.3
Interactive navigation aids (online help)	3	3.8
Questionnaires	5	6.4
Visitor initiated questionnaires	0	0
Polls	7	9.0
Visitor initiated polls	0	0
Petitions	3	3.8
Visitor initiated petition	1	1.3
Flickr	15	19.2
RSS feeds	21	26.9
Twitter	3	3.8
Videos uploaded	27	34.6
Visitors can upload material	20	25.6
Use of networks	25	31.2
Use of fora	26	33.3
Ability of all visitors to share information	64	82.1
Ability of all visitors to update information	24	30.8
Private Conversation	51	65.4
Public Conversations	52	67.5

MPs appear willing to facilitate the interaction of others within their Web 2.0 applications, but less interested in actually being directly involved themselves. This is especially the case with SNS, where MPs seem to encourage intra-party communication rather than creating a space for constituents or members of the public to interact. Whilst there is a minority that do encourage interaction, overall the majority use SNS to enhance their ability to inform. We suggest that sites perform two functions: first, they allow the MP to promote themselves freely within a large public network; second they enhance their ability to disseminate information within, as opposed to conversing with, that network. The potential for interaction is present through MPs' use of Web 2.0 tools, but the evidence suggests that few MPs have fully endorsed it. As with political parties (Lilleker & Jackson, *f/c*) many MP's sites appear to attract graffiti, single messages from visitors that receive no responses or reactions, than notes from either the host or the visitor designed to stimulate debate. Classic examples are the messages of good will to Sir Menzies Campbell on his birthday; however this may partly be a result of the fact that not all SNS users maintain their own profiles: Nick Clegg's for example is more about him (or one of his staff) posting news items, but little sense of interaction.

### Assessing the quality of interactivity

The concept of interactivity is not just understood by whether a particular feature or tool is present, but also the quality of the potential extent of participation. Given that weblogs and SNS offer differing availability of tools and functions we treat them as distinct entities, for each function available on each site we assessed the level of visitor control and the potential for one, two or three way communication. For ease, figures 3 and 4 show the percentage of features that fall within a particular sector of the model.

**Figure 3: Interactivity on Weblogs**

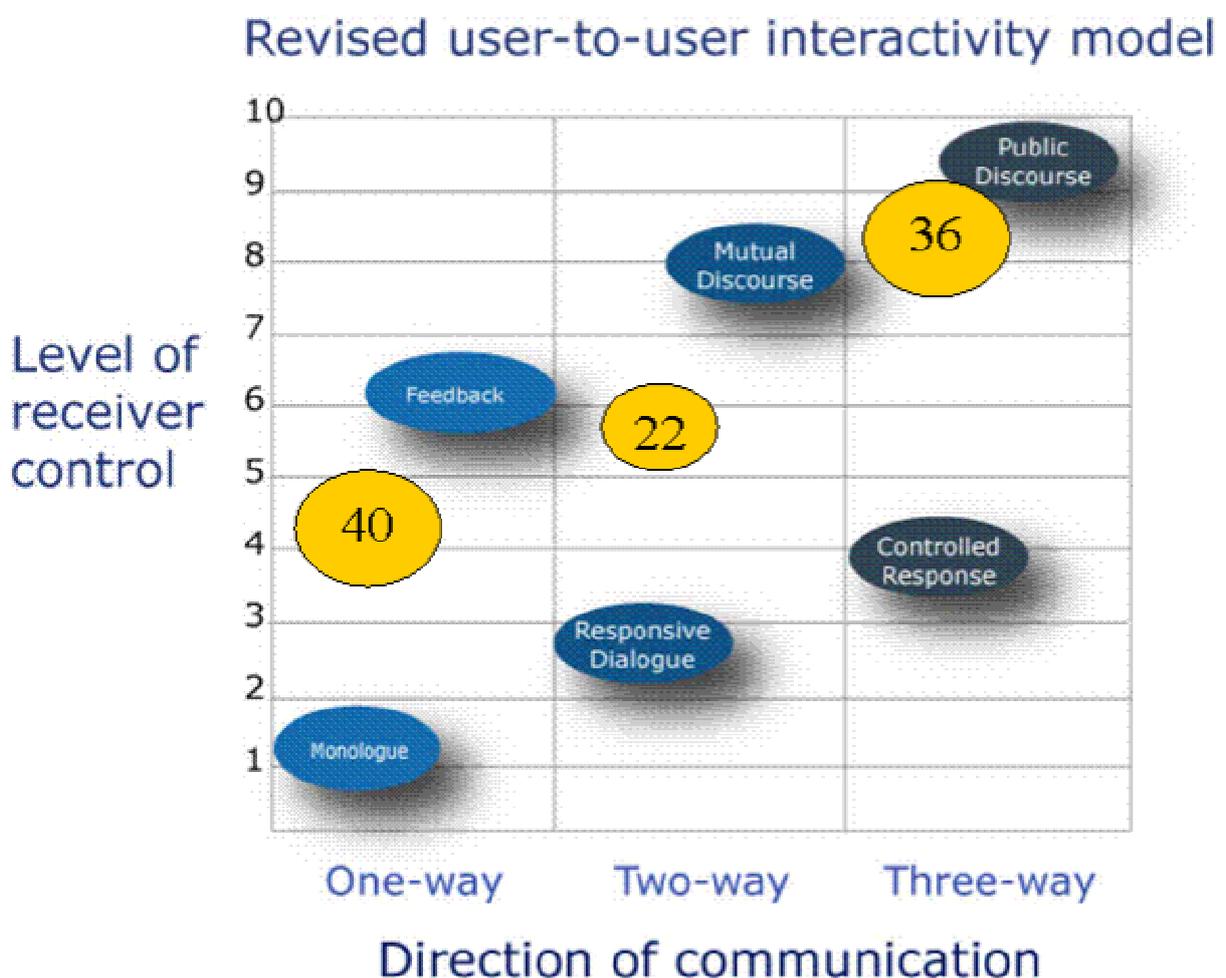


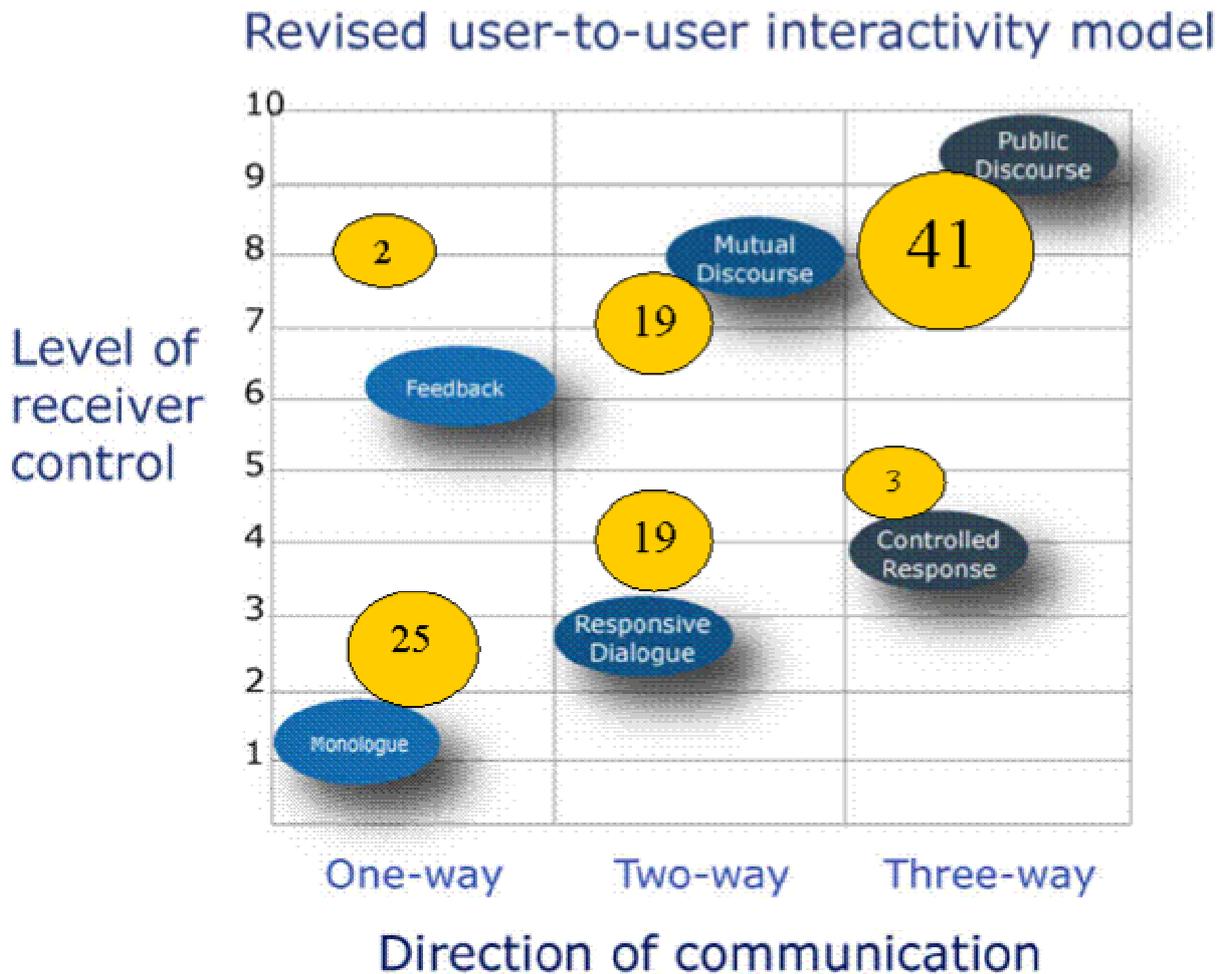
Figure 3 suggests that there is not a uniform approach to how MPs use interactivity within their weblogs, rather we identify three different approaches. As suggested by Francoli and Ward (2008) we also note that a third of MPs view their weblog as a one-way communication channel, and so do not even provide a facility for visitors to offer comments on the MPs' posts. For such MPs a weblog is an electronic brochure, not an interactive tool. For example,

Derek Wyatt (Lab) uses his weblog to outline what he is doing on a daily basis within both parliament and the constituency, presumably to reinforce the message that he is working hard for the constituency. He does not provide a comments function, and so presumably does not want feedback via his weblog. The second approach, by another third of MPs' blogs encourages two-way communication, although several actually generate few or no comments. For example, Andy Love (Lab) posted on seven different topics in the month studied, but only one generated a single comment. Despite the fact that such visitor comments may occasionally encourage responses from other visitors, there is very little public discussion. This level of public discourse can be explained by the lack of 'stickiness' (Jackson 2003) of such sites: the limited, and often irregular, number of posts from MPs, do not act as an incentive for visitors to return frequently. Equally, the language and tone is informational and not seeking to generate comments. In the remaining third, we witness a more interactive model where MPs encourage three-way communication. Sometimes this is because visitors themselves get into a debate, but usually it is because the MP asks questions and directly responds to comments made, and so publicly defending or amending their views. For example, Tom Harris (Lab) often directly adds a comment responding to other commenters. John Redwood (Cons) frequently responds to specific questions, for example, when one visitor asked him the Conservative Party's policy on rubbish collection, he gave a clear and precise answer. Lynne Featherstone (Lib Dem), possibly reflecting the 'community politics' approach of her party, particularly focuses on local issues likely to be of interest to constituents. Perhaps a third of blogging MPs can be viewed as pioneers using their weblog as an interactive channel, which provides a model that the others could adopt.

Figure 4 suggests that whilst existing theory (Philips 2007) would expect SNS to be the most likely application to encourage three-way public discourse, there is evidence that MPs are using SNS to support four distinct types of interactivity. Surprisingly, the second most popular model is monologue, where MPs use parts of their SNS as an electronic brochure. The next two, equally popular approaches suggest that MPs use their SNS as a two-way communication channel, either to encourage mutual discourse or responsive dialogue. These are less popular than the monologue approach. The most popular approach, is to use an SNS to encourage a 3-way public discourse; though this is often due to the architecture of participation provided by the creators of SNS such as Facebook rather than evidence of a specific strategy. However, with that caveat duly noted, we suggest that SNS are most likely

to be used by an MP to mainly support a new form of public communication, or the more traditional one-way communication, and not the middle ground of two-way communication.

**Figure 4: Interactivity on Social Networking Sites**



We note, that with party and MPs' weblogs there is similarity in terms of the popularity of models, but this is not quite the case with SNS. Lilleker & Jackson (f/c) also identified four models applied, albeit slightly differently, to political party SNS use. While again, three-way public discourse was the most popular, it is with the other three models that there is some difference between parties and MPs in using SNS. The second most popular approach for parties is one-way monologue, but where the two remaining approaches for MPs are to be found within the two-way models, this is not the case for parties. The parties do not appear to encourage two-way mutual discourse, but they do permit three-way controlled responses. This comparison suggests that for political actors, be they individual politicians or political parties, SNS are most likely to be used to either support three-way public discourse or one-

way monologue. The difference between the two sets of political actors is over whether SNS also encourages two-way communication or not.

The data in figure 4 suggests that MPs make choices about how much interaction they feel is appropriate or desirable on their SNS, but a significant number appear happy for discussions to take place within the comments space or on the walls of Bebo, Facebook or MySpace. While their own voice can be limited, they may have instigated the discussion but do not rejoin the debate, the visitor has a lot of opportunity to interact with a range of pieces of information (following links) but also to give feedback in a variety of ways. In such a situation, an MP's SNS acts as a facilitator for debate within a community, without that MP necessarily taking an active role in any debate. What is noticeable is that, within social networks, often one comment elicits others and can lead to the participatory dialogue that is the ideal form of interactivity. However, on many sites the potential is under-fulfilled and sites lie dormant with few posts or visitors. Clearly, interactivity needs to be personally encouraged by the host, and the 'build it and they will come' theory (Birdsall 2007) is not true for all social network profiles. The host must provide a reason for members of the network to desire to be their friends and then to interact with them, if not they are largely sites that have interactive features but lack any real interaction. This is clearly evidenced by Adrian Sanders (Lib Dem) or Tom Brake (Lib Dem), both of whom use SNS as an extension of their *constituency service* role and so interact with constituents because of that; though maybe also because of his notoriety Respect MP and talk radio jockey George Galloway communicates on a range of communication on politics or his wider interests. In contrast, those who only post news gain little comment, and on the whole seem to have less friends within the site's network and perhaps are seen as not using the site in the way that has become appropriate for the community (Lilleker & Jackson, 2009).

A comparison of figures 3 & 4 suggests that an MP's SNS are more likely to be interactive than their weblog (.277; significant to 0.05), which is consistent with Phillips (2007). However, we note that this higher level of interactivity is of a particular type. Many MPs use their SNS as a personal profile; they interact with personal friends and local party members, rather than constituents (or others) unknown to them offline. Hence for MPs, as with any other individual users, SNS add value to existing social networks rather than creating new ones (Haythornwaite 2005). For example, Julia Goldsworthy (Lib Dem) stated that she used MySpace and Facebook as informal tools to keep in touch with family and friends

(Goldsworthy 2008). In contrast, a few MPs such as Andy Reed (Lab), Steve Webb (Lib Dem) and Adrian Sanders (Lib Dem) use their SNS as a means of fundamentally altering their communication with constituents. Webb explicitly uses his Facebook profile for informal contact on matters such as local post office closures, as well as responding supportively to a complaint from one constituent on the equipment he was given on joining the army. Sanders' leads on local issues such as the restructuring of Devon unitary authority, Torbay football club, as well as his own initiative for mobile users to be able to text 999 for emergency help; these elicit responses, mainly from constituents, allowing him to combine the *delegate* and *trustee* approaches when performing his *constituency service* function. We also note that there appears to be a direct connection between use of SNS, and the level of response from visitors. Those MPs like Reed, Sanders and Webb, who talk most about political issues relevant to the constituency, have more friends, and seem most likely to receive feedback (Table 4).

**Table 4: Conversations and areas of common interest**

Common interest		Constituency	Policy Area	Outside Interests
Constituency	Blog	.003	-.179	-.353*
	SNS	.402*	.090	-.011
Policy Area	Blog	-.179	.169	-.379*
	SNS	.090	.155	-.291
Outside Interest	Blog	.278	.048	.548**
	SNS	-.066	-.156	.402*

The correlations outlined in table 4 suggest that within our overall data there is some interesting differences between weblogs and SNS in two of our criteria for a common interest: outside interests and constituency. MPs who predominantly talk about policy have few conversations with visitors to either their weblogs or SNS profiles. MPs weblogs appear most likely to encourage conversation on their outside interests' posts. For example, Lynne Featherstone (Lib Dem) generated a number of comments to her post on political blogging, Tom Harris (Lab) generated responses to posts on his favourite pop songs, and several on the English language. John Redwood (Cons) who generates the greatest number of posts has an eclectic range including motoring in the UK, the problems with proportional representation and watching the archaeology programme *Time Team* on television. SNS, in contrast, are more likely to be used for conversations on matters pertaining to constituency, in the case of

Facebook due to the link between the boundaries set by the site and a geographic area (boyd and Ellison 2007), or due to the content itself. These range from YouTube videos introducing areas of concern among constituents, as used by Norman Lamb (Lib Dem), or references to local issues posted to Facebook profiles. There is both statistical evidence and observations garnered during the content analysis that starting a conversation leads to responses using this modality. However, and this is perhaps interesting, the most common subject for conversations are about outside interests that are shared between the MP and some of the visitors to their weblogs and SNS. These are fairly diverse and range from comments on music by Sanders, Andy Reed's passion for rugby, or more personal, perhaps fairly normal user issues, including one female MP talking about what to wear to a function publicly on her Facebook Wall. This links far more to a notion of representation of the self than any sense of political representation; in fact this supports the notion of Web 2.0 being used to build an image of the MP, and their hinterland, to represent them as authentic and ordinary individuals with a 3-dimensional personality, as opposed to an out-of-touch politician dwelling only within the Westminster village. Overall, however, despite indications that conversations can be started and so relationships built, most MPs are not using their SNS as a strategic communication channel, but perhaps they should as there appears to be evidence that constituents do respond positively to such a use of an MP's SNS.

### **Representation and Web 2.0**

Table 5 shows that across both weblogs and SNS, the *partisan* role is the most common feature, particularly on SNS, which is consistent with Norton's (2007) research on Web 1.0. *Constituency service* is the second most popular, and is used much more strongly than in Web 1.0 (Norton 2007), followed by *trusteeship*. This is significantly different from the order suggested by Churchill (1954). The question is whether this is because gradually in the past 50 years the priorities have organically changed due to long-term pressures, or has the fairly short use of one technology rapidly changed the roles an MP plays. As we shall see, it is largely the former, but a number of pioneers have grasped new opportunities that the Internet has presented them.

Despite their inherent individualist functionality, SNS profiles seem to be most likely to be used to promote party policy and so support of the party. MPs do allow one-to-one communication, usually by the provision of contact details within the site, but in terms of

communicative functions after party their next priority is to act as an advocate for the constituency using both weblogs and SNS as a forum. Interestingly weblogs are used to refer directly to constituency casework. For example, Jeremy Hunt (Cons) posted "After delivering leaflets for Boris in the rain in Ealing yesterday...I was reminded of what really matters to voters by a visit to the Haslemere and Waverly Alzheimers Society in my constituency...Through the election fever, they have reminded me what politics should be really about." Sadiq Khan (Lab) posts almost exclusively about local issues, or links national issues to his local constituency. In the month studied, Khan refers to local students he is mentoring, constituents he has hosted in the Commons and a meeting with residents regarding a local hospital. His approach is more than just listing his local engagements; he also promotes the activity of local community groups such as The Khalsa Centre in Tooting, an active local Sikh organisation. Similarly, several posts from Adrian Sanders (Lib Dem) refer to the fact that his local football team was due to play at Wembley in the FA Trophy Final. Clearly, greater emphasis on *constituency* matters is due to the ability to form arguments within a weblog entry, and the ease in which MPs can link to the post in order to disseminate information. The *trustee* role is most likely to be used when MPs want to use their SNS or weblog to discuss national campaigns important to them, such as the proposed changes to Abortion being discussed in Parliament at the time of the data collection.

**Table 5: Representative model approaches across weblogs and SNS**

<b>Model/Feature</b>	<b>Weblog</b>	<b>SNS</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Delegate</b>			
Access to constituents only	0	0	0
Seek to identify what constituents think of key issues	6	10	16
Surveys	2	6	8
Discussion forum	0	9	9
Opinion polls	2	2	4
Encourage one-to-one communication	34	17	51
<b>Total for Delegate approach</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Trustee</b>			
Press releases	6	6	12
Promotes media coverage secured	10	23	23
Promotes speeches given	10	17	27
Promotes public meetings	9	16	25
Promotes personal campaigns	36	24	60
<b>Total for Trustee approach</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Party</b>			
Promotes party policy	24	27	51

Promotes local party activity	14	14	28
Promotes national party activity	27	22	49
Encourages party membership/support	0	17	17
Promotes party election campaigns	19	19	38
Uses content provided by national party	6	17	23
<b>Total for Party approach</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>Constituency Service</b>			
Refers to casework/constituents	21	9	30
Speaks for constituency	27	21	48
Seeks views on local issues	5	9	14
Seeks views on national issues	4	9	13
Provides local information	17	24	41
Promotes local community activity	8	18	26
<b>Total for Constituency approach</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>172</b>

However, we suggest that the data provides the evidence for not only a change in the priorities of each of the four main roles, but also the existence of a new fifth role, which supports but is distinct from the *constituency* service role, namely the *promotion of self* or in Williamson’s terminology ‘personal marketing’ (2009, p. 20). Commenting on admissions by Tom Harris (Lab) in his weblog about his past, Woods (2009) notes that: “Suddenly Harris is in danger of emerging from the Westminster necropolis as an altogether more human figure than the average backbench zombie.” The intention with the *promotion of self* role is to promote either the reality, or an illusion, of the MP as an individual. We can observe a great deal of personal information displayed across both weblogs and SNS that presents a more three-dimensional view of the individual, what Auty (2005) referred to as ‘evidence of personality’ and Jackson (2008b) as ‘hinterland’. Hence, the visitor gets a sense of the MP as an individual, and hopefully will empathise, engage with and like them. SNS allow MPs to advertise their favourite bands, movies, books, quotes etc. For example, the Liberal Democrat leader (Nick Clegg) is apparently happiest reading Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* while listening to Johnny Cash; Labour’s Andy Reed favours sport, non-intrusive music and alternative comedy. Similarly, using weblogs MPs can get across their ordinariness. For example, David Jones (Cons) makes clear that he is a lifelong Liverpool FC supporter, and Jim Murphy (Lab) points out his favourite movie and asks visitors which is theirs. Equally, both SNS and weblogs allow the communication of an impression of a hard-working, committed representative engaged in a range of activities both political and personal. Grant Shapps’ (Cons) YouTube based videolog deals with repairing footpaths, and saving post offices and pubs in the Welwyn and Hatfield area, as well as his participation in the debate on the Housing and Regeneration Bill. Blogging MPs such as Sadiq Khan (Lab) and Derek Wyatt

(Lab) use their weblogs primarily as a means to show exactly who they have met in the constituency, when and why. Whilst *promotion of self* clearly has links to the *constituency role*, it does add to our understanding of how MPs conduct their representative role. One could argue that MPs are using Web 2.0 in the same way as many non-political users of Bebo and Facebook, as a way of building their own space within this new arena that has been integrated in, and is integral to, the promotional culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

## **Conclusion**

MP's weblogs and SNS use some of the interactive features available. However, MPs are slightly more likely to use a weblog as a one-way channel to promote their views, and the use of interactivity within SNS is narrow. Whilst some MPs do use their SNS as a monologic communication channel, they are slightly more likely to encourage visitors to interact with the site than themselves. Hence, this is more likely to lead to horizontal communication with other visitors, rather than direct public communication with the MP. Indeed, we find that MPs are almost as likely to consider the one-way communication features of Web 2.0 applications, as they represent an opportunity to gain feedback. This can be explained to some extent by the need to inform and promote themselves as part of their campaigning role, however, clearly MPs differ in the stress they place on promotion and interaction, which in turn may shape their representative role.

Whilst for most MPs with a weblog or SNS, there has been limited change in how they communicate, as Williamson notes following research with MPs themselves on how they have adapted to electronic communication “the Internet is largely being used as a tool to publish, not as a tool to engage” (2009, p. 21). However, there are a small number of individual champions, probably about 20-25 MPs, who are using Web 2.0 applications to create new models of political communication. In terms of weblogs, a minority use them as an interactive means of explaining, and occasionally developing, policy and are encouraging interactivity with constituents. On SNS, the most interactive MPs such as Steve Webb (Lib Dem), Andy Reed (Lab) and Adrian Sanders (Lib Dem) use them to enhance their relationships with constituents and other visitors. Therefore, it is probably no coincidence that the MPs who use either weblogs or SNS as interactive platforms, tend to have both a weblog and a social network presence. This suggests that their commitment is not necessarily to one online communication channel, but that they are pioneers of e-communication as a whole.

Our data suggests that the representation model MPs use in Web 2.0, is similar to that with Web 1.0 applications (Norton 2007), and so their overall style of representative communication online reflects not one but several different roles (Wahlke *et al.* 1962). Moreover, our data suggests that of the four representational roles, it is historically the two most recent, *partisan* (Norton and Wood 1990, Coxall and Robins 1998, Judge 1999) and *constituency service* (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006) which dominate online. This supports Norton's (2007) analysis of Web 1.0 in identifying the importance of party, however, we note a clear distinction in how party is promoted when using Web 2.0 applications. The structural features of weblogs and SNS tend to be *partisan*, but the actual discussion in both modalities is not. The *partisan* model is part of the background furnishing of a Web 2.0 application, rather than actually influencing the main business conducted within such a virtual meeting room. The *partisan* model helps explain the ambience, but we need to look elsewhere for the programme of activities. In addition, whilst Jackson (2008a) identified some use of the *trustee* model demonstrated by the MPs who pioneered blogging, this has increased in importance. It is important to note, however, that SNS are more likely to be used for multiple models. This might be explained by the fact that the inherent nature of SNS means that any discussion cannot be controlled so easily by the host. Moreover, we suggest that the use of representative models does not imply a strategic decision, rather MPs and visitors stick to familiar ground: MPs as trustees or partisans and visitors as constituents or citizens.

However, we suggest that we may be witnessing the infancy of a fifth model, that of *promotion of self*, which focuses on the MP as a human being, not as a dehumanised cog within the body politic. Such an approach may be as either a natural concomitant of individuality, or a deliberate attempt to create an image. Representation online, therefore, does not just focus on 'hard' features such as role and functions, but also applies to 'soft' features such as personality and interests. We suggest that using Web 2.0 applications, online representation enables MPs to present visitors with their non-political side (Auty 2005, Jackson 2008a, Williamson 2009), in a way which may be difficult offline. Perhaps more importantly, if skilfully presented, this *promotion of self* may have a positive impact on visitors, precisely because it provides a three-dimensional image of MPs not normally provided by other communication channels.

Set within a context of a concern about the purpose of individual MPs, Web 2.0 applications have only had a positive impact on a very small minority of pioneering MPs. For most MPs, however, weblogs provide MPs with a tool that allows them to speak to a new global audience so fulfilling a wider version of the *trustee* role, but there is limited evidence that they listen to what is said to them in reply. It is possible that MPs may be subtly influenced, in terms of their thinking on issues, by any comments, but most do not overtly respond to them in the online public domain. Within SNS most MPs are communicating with their friends or party members who they already know offline (Haythornwaite 2005), rather than reaching constituents they did not previously know personally. Only a small minority, such as Reed, Webb and Sanders, use it imaginatively and so this may signal a change in how they communicate to constituents. Such MPs are likely to be reaching new audiences for the first time online (boyd and Ellison 2007), and so extending their social networks. For the pioneers interaction through Web 2.0 applications there is real enhancement of the communicative role, *promotion of self*, but most other MPs have been largely unmoved by their use of Web 2.0 applications. The long term impact of Web 2.0 applications will determine whether they are a passing fad used by only relatively few MPs, or become as normal a communication device for MPs as using a telephone, or indeed the now crucial ‘killer app’ email.

### Footnotes

- 1) A cobweb is a profile with no recent activity, often not within a 12 month period, these are likely to have been created on a whim but almost immediately abandoned.
- 2) A sock-puppet is a commenter on a blog that is, in reality, the blog’s owner and author who is using a pseudonym in order to shape or re-balance debate

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