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**ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:
THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON MPs 1994-2005**

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Abstract

Online Political Communication: the impact of the Internet on MPs 1994-2005

Nigel Anthony Jackson

Existing research on MPs using the Internet (Halstead 2000, Perrone 2002, Ward and Gibson 2003, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005, Ward *et al.* 2005, Jackson 2005, Auty 2005, Jackson 2006b) has tended to be too reliant on content analysis; restricted to one part of the Internet, and involved limited research on the views of actual users of an MP's online presence their views of it. This thesis seeks to identify the impact of the Internet on MPs through: their campaigning abilities; the impact on their role as representatives and how MPs communicate. The research triangulates data on the impact of websites, email, e-newsletters and weblogs through content analysis, questionnaires and interviews. The data collated has helped develop a theoretical understanding of how MPs campaign, represent and communicate. First, there is evidence that e-newsletters can be used as effective vote-winners by encouraging constituents to switch votes. This 'incumbency effect' (Krasno 1994) suggests that existing research (Curtice and Steed 1997, Butler and Collins 2001) has under-estimated the effect of a personal vote (Cain *et al.* 1987). Second, websites and e-newsletters are helping MPs develop a new representative role, by providing an 'information portal' which encourages local participation. Third, there is evidence that we are on the threshold of a new model of e-representation. MPs' use of e-newsletters appears to be developing a parallel of e-constituency which enhances the relationship geographical constituents have with their MP. At the same time, weblogs are creating a separate e-constituency whose online link to an MP is based on interest not geography. Fourth, a typology has been created for explaining how MPs use the Internet, with four different characteristics: *technophobes*; *bandwagoners*; *mapie*; and *pioneers*. The Internet is creating a new architecture of representation with both a territorial axis, and an issue axis accessible from the computer keyboard.

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Preface

As those who know me well, this PhD thing has had a convoluted history. Whilst the development of constituency activity probably started with Themistocles in Athens in BC494, this thesis began with a single seminar topic to final year students at Exeter University. Whilst preparing for this lesson I began to recognise the possible power, opportunities and limitations that the Internet presented MPs.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the help and assistance of Professor Michael Rush who provided advice at the very early stages of my research. I would also like to say a big thank you to all the MP's, and their staff, who gave me that most precious commodity for a politician, time. I don't wish to single out particular MP's but there are several whose interest in this project have helped make it what it has become, you know who you are. I would like also to thank Robert Waller for access to some of the data which will appear in a future edition of his *Almanac of British Politics*. A very big thank you to John Brackstone, of the Market Research Group within the Bournemouth University, School of Services Management, without whose patient technical help the web-hosted surveys would not have happened. I know I was a pain in the backside, but your guidance was invaluable.

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This thesis is dedicated to Team Jackson – Cathy, Eliot and Toby – without you I would not have arrived here.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the result of all my own work and ideas. Some of the data has been presented, but in a different format and theoretical framework in the following:

Jackson, N., (2004a) Escaping from the straitjacket: UK MPs and their e-newsletters' *Aslib Proceedings*, 56(6) pp335-343.

Jackson, N., (2005) Vote Winner or a nuisance: email and the British MPs relationship with their constituents *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing* 14 (1/2) pp91-108.

Abbreviations, definitions and terms

All-Party Backbench committees – Made up by backbench MPs from all parties, who discuss a range of political issues within a particular subject or country. They need a minimum of five backbenchers from the Government party and the opposition parties.

AM – Member of the Welsh Assembly.

ARPANET – a computer network set up by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, part of the U.S. military, which began operating in 1969.

Bulletin boards – an electronic notice board which enables people to post (leave a message) or a topic of common interest.

Commentariat – the community of people who leave comments on a blog (source <http://www.samizdata.net>)

Commenter – a person who leaves remarks in the ‘comments’ section of those weblogs which provide them (source <http://www.samizdata.net>).

Constituency – the geographic area an MP (or other elected representative) represents.

Constituents – refers to those citizens aged 18 and over who are registered to vote in a particular constituency.

Cyberspace – a term attributed to William Gibson in his 1984 novel "Neuromancer," which is widely used now to describe all of the information available through computer networks.

Email – a means of sending text (and files attached) electronically from one computer to another, which became operational in 1970.

E-newsletters – an electronic newsletter, published online, usually distributed by email.

Google – the most popular search engine which helps users of the World Wide Web (WWW) search material of interest to them.

Internet – a global computer network of networks that enables information to be shared.

Marginal seat – a seat which an MP won by a small majority (either percentage or number of votes).

Mosaic – a browser software, which later became known as Netscape.

Online – when a computer is connected with other computers.

Podcast – derived from Apple's iPod and broadcasting allows subscribers to get regular access to files published on the Internet.

Safe seat – where the majority of the victor is large enough that it is unlikely they would be defeated at the next election, unless something very unusual happened.

SMS messaging - SMS stands for Short Message Service, a means of sending ‘texts’ from one telephone to another.

URL – uniform resource locator – an Internet address.

Usenet – an Internet-based bulletin board created in the 1970s, where newsgroups have been created which discuss a range of different topics.

World Wide Web – (WWW) created by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, a hypertext-based information system.

www.parliament.uk – Parliament's official website.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introducing Key Themes

In 1994 Anne Campbell became the first UK MP to create a personal website, yet at the May 2005 General Election she lost her seat. Should this be seen as merely a personal tragedy for one MP, who in a University seat could not resist a combination of anti-war and anti-tuition fees votes? Or does it tell us that, despite being a champion of online communication over eleven years, this technology had minimal effect on her constituents' voting behaviour? A third view is that the problem lay not with the technology, but how Anne Campbell used it. The first theme is: how has the Internet affected the ability of MPs to campaign?

The second theme is the link between the concept of representation and use of the Internet by MPs. Potentially the Internet encourages greater, and enhanced, direct communication with constituents through email, e-newsletters, bulletin boards, websites, weblogs, SMS messaging, podcasts and webcams. After an initially slow start the majority of MPs are online: by 2002 62% of MPs promoted their email address (Jackson 2005); and by 2004, 70% of MPs had a website (Ward and Lusoli 2005). However, this still means that nearly a third of MPs appear not to have an Internet presence. The issue of enhancing representation is not just one of the number of MPs using the Internet, but also how and with what effect they use it. The Internet may bring quantitative changes which enable MPs to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively, but it may also qualitatively change the nature of representation. This study will consider whether the Internet is enhancing MPs' traditional roles, or whether some MPs are developing a discrete e-representation model.

The third theme, the importance of communication to MPs, underpins the previous two. Without the opportunity and ability to communicate, MPs are unlikely to represent (or been seen to represent) their constituents effectively, nor successfully campaign on matters of relevance to them. For example, on his home page Nick Ainger (Labour) states *"As an MP it is important that I set out my position clearly so that my constituents understand my views on a range of issues. We may not agree, but I value the contributions of all my constituents on policy issues, and I believe that it is essential that we all enter into debate."* Whilst not necessarily typical of sentiments on all MPs' home pages, this does suggest that the main audience of an MP's website is those people they need to persuade to re-elect them. It also suggests that any persuasion by an MP is based upon representation enhanced by dialogue

with constituents. An MP's role is predicated, in large part, on their ability to identify, communicate with, listen to and persuade their constituents.

These three specific themes are set within a wider context. The impact of the Internet on MPs cannot be totally isolated from the impact of that technology on both wider society, and the body politic (Negrine and Papathanassoulou 1996, Johnson 2006). Each technology has an impact, to varying degrees, on how society as a whole, and specific groups including political actors, communicate. In addition, how each group uses technology may have an impact on how society views that technology (Bohman 2004). MPs use of the Internet is shaped by how other groups have used the technology, but how MPs use the Internet may influence the use of this technology beyond the confines of the Palace of Westminster.

1.2 The Internet

1.2.1 What is the Internet?

The Internet has been described as a global computer network of networks that allows information to be shared (Kurose and Ross 2001, Di Maggio *et al.* 2001, Coupey 2005, Hill 2005) from computer to computer (Joinson 2003). Therefore, it has integrated the telephone and computer (Barnes 2001). These networks can be both privately and publicly owned (Kurose and Ross 2001, Bohman 2004). Moreover, new networks can be easily added (Poster 1996), so any online presence MPs create adds to the totality of the Internet. Because it can be used to achieve a number of different functions such as a meeting place, market or source of information, the Internet is versatile (Cairncross 2001, DiMaggio *et al.* 2001, Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002). The Internet contains a range of modalities within one single medium (Castells 1996, DiMaggio *et al.* 2001, Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002). For example, Joinson (2003) suggests that there are at least eight modes, though this thesis will concentrate on the three most commonly used by MPs: the World Wide Web, email and weblogs. As a consequence when we study the Internet we are not necessarily considering one single innovation, but a suite of related technologies (Walcott *et al.* 2003). In addition, researchers need to be clear exactly what they mean by the Internet, as it can refer to both the infrastructure (such as IP protocols), and the uses of that infrastructure (such as email) (DiMaggio *et al.* 2001, Bohman 2004). This research project will focus on the uses of Web technology.

The Internet is a hybrid technology capable of being both an unmediated interpersonal communication channel, and a broadcast mass media (Barnes 2001). As a result, it is capable

of both building relationships between individuals as a social tool, and/or transferring information which implies no or limited social impact. In terms of our three modalities, email is essentially an interpersonal communication channel (Kraut *et al.* 2003), the World Wide Web primarily a broadcast channel (Kraut *et al.* 2003), with weblogs potentially a combination of both.

1.2.2 A brief history of the Internet

Although political websites were not built until 1993 (Johnson 2001), the history of what became the Internet started with the Cold War. The launch by the Russians of Sputnik 1 in 1957, followed in 1962 by the Bay of Pigs crisis, led US military planners to ask how the U.S. armed forces and the Government would communicate during a nuclear war (Winston 1998, Abbate 1999, Slevin 2000, Castells 2002, Hassan 2004). The ability of one computer to ‘talk’ to another was considered the answer; and therefore, initially the Internet was not a person to person communication channel (Joinson 2003). The 1960s saw the development by military scientists of the ARPANET, launched in 1969, whereby military bases could communicate with one another in the event of a nuclear holocaust (Abbate 1999, Chadwick 2006). Over twenty years before the Internet suddenly ‘burst onto the scene’ its origins were already in place.

The military had been the driving force behind this nascent computer network, but during the 1970s and 1980s the academic community was increasingly involved. U.S. academics could share information between one another, but also use their skills and experience to help improve the communication process. The development of the Internet was not restricted to this official community. From the late 1960s, a computer network operating outside of ARPANET grew up around the US counterculture movement (Castells 1996, Chadwick 2006). In 1970 email was developed, and this was fundamentally different from the ARPANET because it enabled person-to-person communication (Joinson 2003). With the invention of the modem in 1978 and the creation of an online forum, Usenet, in 1979 another element of the Internet was in place (Davis 2005). Therefore, by the 1980s the development of software and various protocols meant that the Internet, in effect, existed as we now know it. However, it was still the preserve of a small community of experts. It took Tim Berners-Lee to invent the World Wide Web in 1989, and then the creation in 1993 of a freely available browser, Mosaic, to transform this communication medium (Joinson 2003). It then became increasingly open to wider social, commercial and political usage. The development

of the Internet has been shaped by a plurality of interests, with not one controlling it (Barnes 2001).

Originally the users of cyberspace were primarily young, male and educated, in short, they were referred to as computer 'geeks'. However, in recent years the demographic profile of those online has changed. The computer 'geeks' have been joined by young children at school, the 'silver surfers' and the gender difference has been largely eroded. Before the 2001 General Election, Internet access in the UK was 26.2% of the population, but by 2005 it was 59.8% (Internet World Stats 2006). Whilst clearly not everyone has access to the Internet at school, home or work, it has now become a mainstream communication channel.

1.2.3 The peculiarities of the Internet

Our understanding of online political communication is shaped by four characteristics of the Internet:

- 1) User-led: it is the user who decides what information they access (Ollier 1998, Ward 2001). More importantly, with the Web being non-linear the user, and not the producer, chooses in what order they access information. This has led Grieco (2002) to suggest that the Internet is non-hierarchical, and that the power of the sender has been reduced.
- 2) Interactivity: the fact that the Internet is user-led means that it has encouraged interactivity, with the receiver of the message offering their feedback. Indeed, a consensus exists that the most important and unique aspect the Internet offers is interactivity (Hoffman and Novak 1996, Bell 1998, Steel 2001, Ward 2001). However, as Sadow and James (2000) point out, a consensus does not exist of what interactivity means. For Steel (2001) interactivity is a vague concept where citizens take an active part in the political realm. Auty and Cowen (2000) are more prescriptive in suggesting that interactivity refers to two-way communications, with opinion polls the highest level of interactivity. Williams *et al.* (2000) takes this a stage further by suggesting that a visitor to a website is actively involved in the information gathering process, and so can offer information as well as receive it. Common to all of these approaches is the importance of dialogue, but they all focus on the receiver. Only Morris (2003) considers the sender who, he suggests, has to be more disciplined in communicating because they have to be responsive to customer needs.

- 3) Changes the location of power: politicians who communicate directly with constituents avoid the gatekeepers of the media. As a result, Ward (2001) has suggested that its decentralising nature is the source of a key impact of the Internet.
- 4) Changed timeframe for communicating: the Internet allows for both asynchronous and synchronous communication, depending on what the receiver prefers (Bonchet 1995, Grieco and Holmes 1999). The receiver could access a message, and respond to it, at a time to suit them.

Research suggests that political parties and individual politicians are not fully utilising the potential the Internet offers them, in part, because they do not have the skills and knowledge to appreciate what might be achieved (Sadow and James 1998, Sadow and James 2000, Auty and Cowen 2000, Jackson 2003). This raises questions of how professional MPs are as communicators, because of the importance of gaining new skill sets (Lilleker and Negrine 2002). Moreover, this failure is due to two interrelated reasons. First, interactivity requires significant investment in resources: principally time (Sadow and James 2000, Jackson 2005). Second, there is no conclusive research on the electoral or representative value of the Internet to guide politicians.

1.3 Political Communication

1.3.1 The history of political communication

Consideration of the meaning, process and techniques of political communication is a relatively new field of study. Its origins are usually associated with research projects on U.S. Presidential elections (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944, Berelson *et al.* 1954). By the 1970s, Chaffee in particular is associated with further developing political communication as a discrete discipline. In the UK, a significant body of work that addressed the communication process within the political sphere did not really develop until the 1990s (Franklin 1994, McNair 1995, Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Negrine 1996). This literature considered both the concepts and practice of political communication.

For most of its history, the focus of the study of political communication has been on the use and impact of the dominant communication tool in the political process: the mass media. Originally, consideration was given only to the media and election campaigns (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944, Berelson *et al.* 1954, Klapper 1960), but this has eventually spread to all aspects of political activity (Chaffee 2001). For thirty years, political communication was synonymous with the impact of the media on the political process, and, consequently how political actors

manage the dissemination of information via this medium. However, since the 1980s legal, economic and technological changes have fragmented mass communications (Norris 2000, Davis 2003), and so multiplied the number of mass media operators in both print and broadcast media. The impact of each message is diluted as it has to compete with an ever-expanding number of competitors who can transmit that message (Ries and Ries 2002). At the same time changes in telecommunications have provided new interpersonal communication channels which have challenged the primacy of the mass media. Therefore, as MPs became more 'professional' in outlook, initially political discourse was conducted via the mass media, but more recently they have had to also master digital technologies.

1.3.2 The meaning of political communication

The manifestation of political communication can be oral, written or visual (McNair 1995). However, the dominance of mass communication has shaped the nature of political communication, suggesting that it is a primarily mediated process (Bennett and Entman 2001). Within this process we can identify four key functions of political communication: articulation of ideas; mobilisation of interested groups and individuals; enhanced participation; and the management of conflict between groups (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995). The first of these four functions stresses the development and presentation of ideas, the latter three are essentially concerned with encouraging interaction between different ideas and the groups that promote, or are affected by, them. Within a representative democracy, the ultimate purpose of political communication is to help shape the political agenda, inform decision making and provide a safety net for the expression of ideas. Political communication, therefore, should benefit both the elected and the electorate.

Central to understanding online political communication is the debate on three key issues: how to communicate; in which direction; and with what effect? The first question asks whether political communication is direct or indirect? In other words, are political communicators using unmediated communication channels, such as face-to-face communication, which are direct from sender to receiver? Or, is political communication largely a mediated process whereby a political actor first sends their message to a third party, a gatekeeper, who may then amplify and send on this message? The former is direct to the intended receiver, but the latter, although riskier, potentially benefits from possible third party endorsement. Increasingly, commentators are suggesting that this is not an either/or choice, rather that political communications should utilise both approaches (Chaffee 2001, Jackson and Lilleker 2004).

The second question looks at whether political communication is largely linear or not. One approach suggests that political communication has largely been vertical, from one level of communicators to another. Moreover, the assumption is that the direction of vertical communication is one-way, top-down, from governments, political parties and representatives to the wider public, citizens and constituents. There has been limited research to suggest that such vertical communication should also be bottom-up. The other approach is horizontal which suggests that communication is across different levels. Clearly, this would be between the political elites, such as political parties and MPs, but it can also be between networks of citizens such as within pressure groups, or even constituents. Although the Internet has been viewed as primarily a vertical communication tool (Norris 2002), it has also been associated with horizontal communication (Castells 2002, Hale 2003). Potentially, in using the Internet MPs can encourage both vertical and horizontal communication.

The third question, effect, has possibly generated the greatest debate. Can a political actor persuade or manipulate other political actors and individual citizens (Blumler and McQuail 1968, Norris *et al.* 1999)? Within a representative system can individuals or groups of citizens disproportionately influence and shape the political debate? (Tichenor *et al.* 1970, Moloney 2000) In other words, a whole host of messages are sent out by a number of communicators using a variety of communication channels, but what impact do they have? The orthodox view suggests that such messages, both direct and indirect, shape the framework within which political discourse operates (McQuail 2005). However, this has been predicated primarily on the existence of a situation where mass communication is dominant.

1.4 The Role of the Internet in Political Communication

1.4.1 The Internet in political discourse

The short history of online political communication has been largely dominated by the United States. This in part reflects the Americanisation of politics hypothesis (Swanson and Mancini 1996, see for a discussion Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996), but is also a result of a weaker party system which gives greater emphasis to candidates' campaigns (Davis 1999). The 1996 U.S. Presidential election was viewed as the world's first where the Internet played a role. In every U.S. Presidential, gubernatorial and congressional election since, the importance of the Internet has grown. In 1998 the new technology was believed to have helped the ex-wrestler Jesse Ventura be elected Governor of Minnesota (Clift 2002).

Without an existing party structure, Ventura used his website and email to reach and mobilise supporters, and generate funds. Many commentators felt that the Internet had come of age as a campaigning tool in 2003, when Howard Dean went from being an outsider to briefly a front runner in the Democratic Presidential primaries (Gibson and McAllister 2003, Sommer 2003, Johnson and Kaye 2004). Although Dean was not selected, his imaginative use of the Web, email and weblogs gained attention, and was copied by other U.S. politicians. This led some commentators to ask whether the Internet was ‘breaking the mould’, and transforming political communication (Sommer 2003).

The Internet has become a battleground for the exercise of power (Conway *et al.* 2003). As a communication channel it has essentially been viewed as means for the political elite to maintain their control, or the disenfranchised to have their voice heard (Scott and Street 2000). For example, Blood (2000a) highlighted how street activists used the Internet to mobilise themselves. However, the impact of the Internet is not just at the top and bottom of the political process, it also provides opportunities for those in the middle, such as elected representatives. As part of the growth of post-modernism with a greater reliance on direct communication (Norris 2000), and the encouragement of localisation (Eade 1997, Norris 2000), elected representatives can carve out a niche for themselves. The Internet potentially alters the relationship between an MP and their constituents by facilitating one-to-one communication, and other online networks (Hall 1997).

1.4.2 The Internet in UK politics

With a more rigid party system and less regular elections, the political experience of the Internet in the UK is slightly different. The first political website was created by HM Treasury in 1994, with the major political parties setting up theirs from the mid-1990s. The 1997 General Election was the first where the Internet was used as a communication channel in the UK, but it was primarily a novelty with no actual impact (Gibson and Ward 1998). By the 2001 General Election all the major parties, and some of the smaller ones had a website and were beginning to use email (Coleman 2001a, McCarthy and Saxton 2001, Gibson *et al.* 2003b). However, online campaigning was still a sideline pursued by a few enthusiasts but largely ignored by the party hierarchies (Coleman 2001a). Although the use of the Internet by political parties in 2001 did gain some welcome press interest, its proponents were engaged more in a battle to persuade their own party of its value than directly persuading the electorate. However, by 2001 parties hoping to win seats did at least recognise they needed a website.

If the 2001 general election was a test run, enabling its proponents to experiment, throughout the next four years the party e-campaigners began to make more use of the Internet. All of the largest parties regularly updated their websites, especially before major elections, such as the 2004 European Parliament (Lusoli 2005). The largest parties also directed more of their efforts towards email, especially the development of email lists and the sending out of regular e-newsletters (Coleman and Hall 2001, McCarthy and Saxton 2001, Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2006c). This communication medium quickly became recognised by the larger parties as an invaluable tool for reaching journalists and supporters, although of minor relevance to attracting floating voters. Interestingly, up to 2005 parties largely ignored weblogs, probably correctly viewing them as personalised, not corporate, diaries. However, in the run-up to the 2005 General Election the size and importance of party e-campaigning teams grew (Jackson 2006a).

The Internet has had an impact upon the political sphere in the UK in a number of ways. One area of interest has been e-government where the focus has been on how the Internet can enhance the machinery of Government. For example, Government Ministers such as Robin Cook (Cook 2003) and John Prescott considered e-voting, government websites and how national and local public agencies can improve their services (Irani *et al.* 2005). This approach is consistent with the citizen-initiated school which considers how individual citizens communicate with Governmental officials, rather than elected representatives (Thomas and Streib 2003). The focus of e-government, therefore, is on how information technology can provide 24/7 access for the public to the Government machinery (Evangelidis *et al.* 2002). E-government is the study of essentially a non-partisan and non-political use of the Internet, and so concerns itself with governance, whereas this research project considers online political communication covering the partisan use of technology and how it represents shifts in power and influence between sectors of society. It addresses, as noted above, the use of the Internet in electoral contests, the mobilisation of citizens and e-democracy. The concept of e-democracy introduces the link between elected representatives and those who elect them (Coleman 1999, Hoff *et al.* 2004).

1.5 Members of Parliament

1.5.1 The professionalisation of MPs

As communication becomes more important to political actors, professionals have increasingly offered particular technical skills, such as marketing (Mancini 1999, Plasser 2002). Whilst employed professionals are playing an increased role in political communication, politicians themselves are also becoming more professional. This implies that individual politicians have gained new skills or developed specialisms (Lilleker and Negrine 2002). The professionalisation of political communication reflects changes in both the political and media systems, which encourages political organisations to become more streamlined (Negrine 2007). In the period 1994-2005, the dominant change in the media system was the arrival of the Internet. Professionalism implies that MPs in using the Internet will change both how they communicate and function.

A number of developments have occurred since the 1960s which have shaped the nature, behaviour and role of MPs. Traditionally, MPs had been classified as ‘amateur’ in outlook. This meant that Westminster was not necessarily their only, or main, focus as many had other careers, for example, in agriculture, business or law. Many were financially independent of any MP’s salary, and the working conditions within Westminster were mostly very basic with limited space and staff resources. Moreover, the Parliamentary timetable reflected that for many, politics was a second, and essentially evening, occupation. There was a sense, therefore, of belonging to a club (Rush 2001).

There has been a decline of the part-time MP (Rush and Giddens 2002) as the resource, structural and functional reforms begun in the early 1960s have slowly created a more professional approach (King 1981). Possibly the beginning of this process was the extension of the House of Commons library service in the early 1960s (Rush 1988). The next important development was by Richard Crossman, Leader of the House in the late 1960s, who introduced more committees. This was formalised in the creation of the present select committee structure in 1979. Membership of Select Committees now account for a significant proportion of many backbench MPs’ workload at Westminster. As MPs have spent more time on parliamentary business there has been a growth of the professional politician, so that a third of new MPs elected in 2001 had been party staffers, parliamentary researchers, ministerial advisers or employees of think tanks (Waller and Griddle 2002). This reflects a perception that it is increasingly difficult to get elected without being a full-time politician (Cairney 2007), and because the nature of an MP’s job is changing (Jun

2003). The growing importance of the scrutinising role, as enhanced by the development of the Committee structure, has facilitated a more professional approach by MPs.

Following the recommendations of the Lawrence Committee in 1964, and then the appointment of the Top Salaries Review Body in 1971, the resources awarded to MPs have significantly increased in terms of their own pay, and their staffing and equipment. At the time of the 2005 General Election, an MP's pay was £57,485, with staffing allowances, dependent on location of their seat, from £66,458 to £77,534. In 1971 only 10% of MPs employed a researcher (Rush 1988), but by 2005 employing research assistants was the norm. This increase in staff resources has already been identified as a factor enhancing MPs' use of media relations (Negrine and Lilleker 2003). The fact that MPs now receive a proportionately higher salary, and can employ a number of staff results from reforms introduced by Edward Short, who was Leader of the House from 1974 to 1976. He brokered a significant increase in the resources available to MPs. Subsequent increases have maintained the levels of financial support in terms of pay and parliamentary allowances. MPs now have sufficient resources, especially staff and equipment, to enable them to develop their roles and utilise communication technologies.

1.5.2 The impact of professionalism on an MP's job

Within a House of Commons where membership is now largely a full-time occupation, the exact role an MP plays has become a pressing question. Political parties might want to limit the freedom of MPs, but professional MPs want to reassert their own individualism (Ward and Lusoli 2005). The increase in resources, the widespread use of select committees and the changing nature of MPs has created an issue over what they are to do with their time. A small minority of MPs have channelled their energies into increased rebellion on the floor of the House (Cowley 2005). However, for most backbenchers much of their time is now taken up with scrutiny work, policy interests or their constituency activities (Norton 1985, Searing 1990). This reflects the fact that MPs are working longer hours, and on an evolving range of tasks. As a consequence, MPs spend less time in the Chamber of the House, but more on a wider representative role. Through efficiency gains the Internet may help MPs become even more professional.

1.6 Summary

The timeframe of this study, from the first website created by an MP in 1994, up until the 2005 General Election, was selected as it allows sufficient time to identify what impact the Internet has had on MPs. It also allows comparison of MPs' enthusiasm for an online

environment with that of society as a whole. Because technological change is continuous, by covering a period of eleven years this can only be an exploratory study. The research will consider whether there has been a fundamental change in how MPs operate, or that the Internet has had no meaningful effect. The impact of the Internet on MPs will be assessed through four aspects: workload; role; information exchange; re-election prospects. The data will consider both the views of MPs and those who access their online presence. Collectively this adds up to an investigation into whether or not we are currently viewing the birth of a separate e-representation model.

Footnote

- 1) They are: Richard Allan (Lib Dem), Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem), Boris Johnson (Conservative), Austin Mitchell (Labour), Clive Soley (Labour), Tom Watson (Labour), Shaun Woodward (Labour).

CHAPTER 2

ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

“Persuasion is ubiquitous in the political process; it is also the central aim of political interaction.” Mutz *et al.* (1996) p1.

2.1 Introduction

The study of political communication is essentially a post-war development, it has adapted ideas from sociology, psychology, communication studies, political science and marketing (Ryfe 2001). Political communication is a competitive and dynamic process, evolving as competing interests seek to gain an advantage. Indeed, a study of the 2005 General Election suggested that political parties were ‘magpies’, stealing any techniques they believe will help them (Lilleker *et al.* 2006) As a result, political actors may jump on communication bandwagons, some of which may prove to be short-lived gimmicks, but others may lead to long-term change. This adaptation to reinvent itself means that political communication has taken its component parts, and moulded these into a new framework for understanding the role of communication within the political process. The adoption of new technologies or techniques may lead to changes in both political communication and the political process.

2.2 Political Communication

2.2.1 Unmediated communication

Political communication can be either unmediated or mediated. Unmediated, or direct, communication is from the sender to receiver, using no intermediary. For example, face-to-face meetings, a public meeting or personalised direct mail. The strength of unmediated communications is that it allows the sender to communicate their message directly to the intended receiver. This should minimise the opportunities for misunderstanding or outside factors to ‘distort’ (Kotler 2001), or interrupt, the meaning of the message.

Face-to-face communication is often viewed as the most persuasive form of communication. The numbers of people who can be reached are limited, but it allows for a number of powerful non-verbal cues to be used, and it enhances immediate feedback. As a result, face-to-face communication has been referred to as the gold standard (Mutz 2001). Therefore, every new technique or technology is compared to face-to-face communication.

2.2.2 *Interpersonal communication*

As mass communication became central to the political communication process, a number of commentators tried to identify what impact it had. Using panels of voters Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944) concluded that the effect of the media (newspapers) on voting behaviour was insignificant at the 1940 U.S. Presidential election. Rather, their two-step flow model suggested that interpersonal networks were more important. They attached great influence to opinion formers, and the media only had an impact if it influenced them, and they judged that the media was not the most important means of reaching these influential citizens.

Successful interpersonal communication required the development of a network of contacts. Therefore, it was in the interests of politicians to maximise the number of people they met. Indeed, Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944) and Berelson *et al.* (1954) suggested that the influence of such personal contacts offset any impact the media could have. As a result, interpersonal communication and mass communication were viewed as rivals. Up to the 1950s, the former was in the ascendancy, since the 1960s it has been the latter. Chaffee (2001) now considers mass communication and interpersonal communication as complementary.

Further U.S. based studies supported the perception that the media was only of secondary importance. Berelson *et al.* (1954) found that personal contacts influenced voters. Klapper (1960) suggested that the impact of the media is limited by the fact that receivers of a message choose what they listen to. In other words, the media may create a message, but the receiver selects whether they are exposed to the message, and then how they interpret it. The importance of interpersonal communication virtually dies out in the literature from the early 1960s. Yet by the 1990s it stages a comeback, as commentators identified a weakening of the dominance of mass communication. Rogers's (1995) concept of diffusion suggested that political information reached the public via both opinion leaders and the media. Keller and Berry (2003) quantified the number of opinion leaders when they identified the importance of the 'influentials'. This referred to the 10% of the American public, involved in local community activity, who influence the views and behaviour of the rest. Individual politicians could maximise the effect of their finite resources by focusing on a small number of 'influentials'.

Interpersonal communication is not limited to face-to-face communication, but also includes personalised written communication. Therefore, one method by which politicians have sought to communicate directly with citizens has been personalised direct mail. This is

particularly useful for explaining relatively complex policy ideas because it uses both words and graphics (Clinton and Clinton 1999). Rather than trying to broadcast to the widest possible number of recipients, a message is narrowcast to a targeted audience who are most likely to be affected by the message contained (Godwin 1988). Such direct communication bypasses the gatekeepers of the media. However, commentators are divided as to whether direct mail is best limited to mobilising existing contacts (Godwin 1988), or whether it helps re-establish the direct link between political actors and unknown citizens (Plasser 2002).

2.2.3 The rise of mediated communication

Mediated, or indirect, communication requires a third party, such as opinion formers (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944, Berelson 1961) or more commonly the media, passing on a message. Press releases sent to the media are a common form of indirect communication ultimately aimed at citizens. Mediated communication has become popular because any third party endorsement strengthens the impact of a message (Ries and Ries 2002). It is, however, a potentially risky strategy, because the mediator acts as a gatekeeper and might not 'endorse' the message. Mediated communication may have more impact than unmediated communication, but it is an imprecise art, and its practice carries risks.

The number of people reached by direct communication is relatively small compared with mass communication channels such as television. As a result over the past forty years, commentators and communicators have tended to focus on mediated communication, with unmediated techniques considered of secondary importance (Bennett and Entman 2001). A consensus exists that technological change has meant that mass communication, and television in particular, has come to dominate political communication (Kavanagh 1996, Mughan 2000, Chafee 2001, Plasser 2002).

2.2.4 The growth of media relations

A number of commentators suggest that the nature of political communication is changing (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Chaffee 2001, Stanyer 2004). The growing predominance of professionals in political communication has encouraged the development of greater media management, and an enhanced role for media managers (Kavanagh 1994, Mancini 1999, Plasser 2002, Dahlgren 2004). It is now common for all political actors to seek to influence the communication process, and this has led to significant interest in 'spin'. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) suggest that rather than being a neutral 'fourth estate', the media has itself now become a participant in the political process. This need to play an active role is driven

by the fact that as a business, the media has a vested interest in the outcome of political contests.

The growth of political media relations cannot be explained solely by the increase of professional political communication. Media-effects theories also help our understanding of this greater use of media relations (Cohen 1963, McCombs and Shaw 1972, Chaffee 1975, Norris 1995). If political actors believe that print and broadcast media help shape public opinion, they will understandably want to influence the media. Therefore, political media relations' has become important as more and more media managers seek to influence the political agenda (Scammell 2001, Jones 2001, Davis 2002).

Media relations has been part of the political process for at least 100 years (Baines *et al.* 2004), with at least two schools of thought on its impact. One school suggests that media management empowers politicians. For example, Davis (2002) suggests that it is the key to social change. This approach suggests that the control of mass communication is in the hands of the political elite, and, that therefore a public relations state has developed (Deacon and Golding 1994). The other school of thought suggests that the attitude of journalists towards politicians has fundamentally altered. Where journalists were deferential towards politicians in the 1950s, now they are contemptuous (Barnett 2002, McNair 2003). For example, Barnett has identified four stages to the development of the relationship between journalists and politicians (2002). At present the relationship, he suggests, can be characterised as antagonistic, with journalists not trusting the messenger, hence limiting the influence of media managers. The worsening relationship between journalists on one side, and politicians and spin doctors on the other side is, according to Barnett (2002), creating a malaise in democracy. Political communicators, therefore, should seek to use available techniques and technologies to address this alleged sense of disillusionment amongst citizens.

2.3 Technology and Political Communication

2.3.1 The diffusion of technology

Technological determinism, usually associated with Bell (1976, 1998) and Tofler (1984), implies that there is little that can be done to resist the impact of new technologies. They suggest it is the nature of the technology itself which is vital for understanding change. Bell (1976) explains that society is moving from the industrial age to an information age. This post-industrial society is information and service led, accompanied by a new technical elite.

Tofler's (1984) analysis is similar to Bell's, in that he suggests that there have been in the past two millennia three ages, agricultural, industrial and post-industrial. He suggests that the information society will have its own determining logic which governments can do little to influence. As part of this post-industrial world, politicians will have no option but to embrace new technology.

Opposing determinism is a belief that the outcome of technological change for different individuals, societies and countries is not given, rather society, the economy and politics all shape the technology (Street 1992, Castells 2002). For example, the proponents of diffusion of innovation theory ⁽¹⁾ identify different factors which shape why and how a new technology is adopted. Originally developed by Tarde (1903), diffusion of innovation theory hypothesises that there will be an 'S' curve. This means that at first each innovation will be adopted by few within each society, then it reaches a high level of penetration amongst the bulk of the population, and then slowing again for those remaining. The 'S' curve can vary from the very steep where adoption is rapid, through to the shallow where adoption is much slower. There exists a possible link between this and a bandwagon effect which may explain the adoption rates of new technologies.

Rogers's (1995) concept of 'diffusion' suggests that people respond differently to the existence of new products, services and technological developments. He identified five adopter categories which he believes applies to each society ⁽²⁾. Some, the early adopters, are likely to try out new technologies and products just shortly after they become available. Others, at the other end of the scale, the laggards, resist new technologies and products, usually being the last to adopt them. According to Rogers, early adopters are usually highly educated, financially independent and politically liberal, with conservatives resistant to change. This suggests that highly conservative, with a small 'c', MPs will be the last to provide an online presence. At the same time, this implies that constituents with the lowest social-economic status will be the last to access the online presence of MPs.

Diffusion of innovation is a function of economic, social, technological, geographic and political factors. Politics helps explain differences in diffusion in two ways. First, the development of new technologies is influenced by political interests (Braun 1995).

Therefore, a government can either slow up or encourage new developments if it affects their interests (Castells 2002). Second, technology can shift the locus of power between and within political organisations, and how individual citizens participate in political activities.

This implies that the introduction of new technologies may shift power relationships between competing groups.

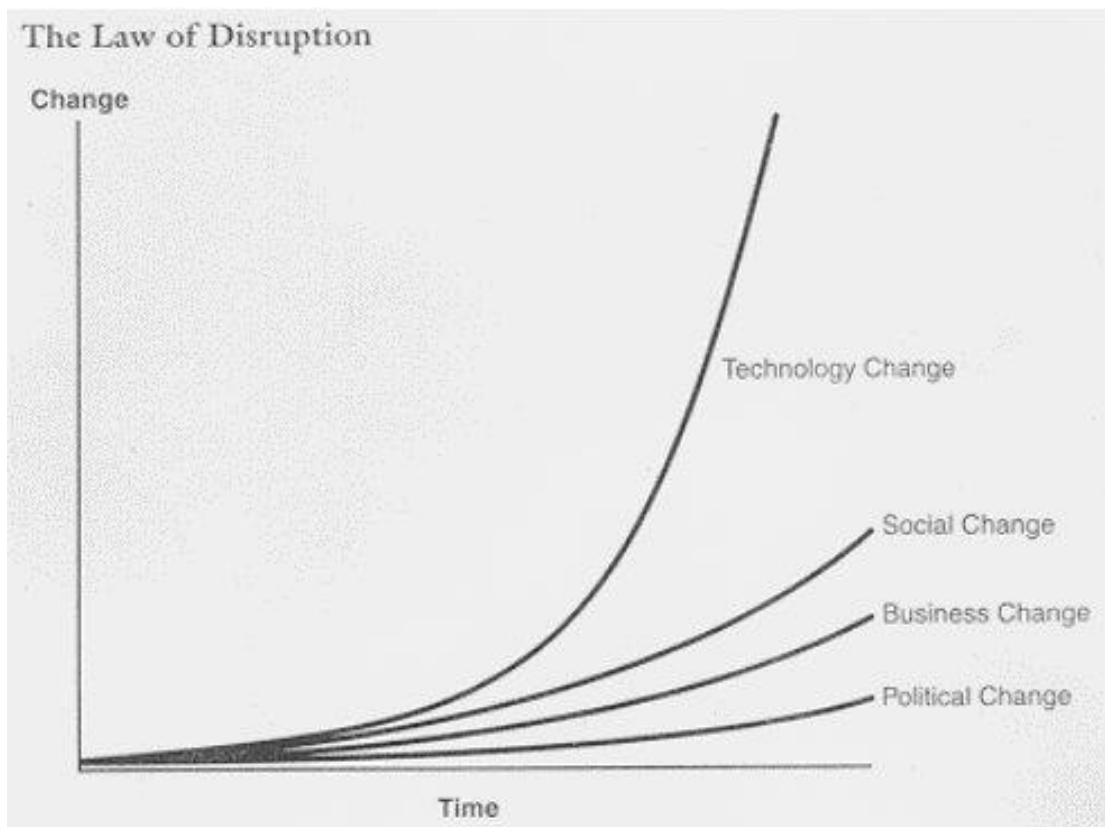
However, economic and political forces alone do not shape the purpose to which new technology is put. A technology may be developed by its inventors for one purpose, but the actual users of that technology may apply it for other purposes (DiMaggio 2001, Cairncross 2001, Castells 2002). For example, Fischer (1992) explains how the telephone was developed as a business tool, but that it became a tool for social interaction, a purpose for which its inventors and financial backers had not considered. Similarly, radio was initially tailored to the needs of the military, but has had at least four metamorphoses, and now differentiates itself from television by targeting niche market needs (DiMaggio *et al.* 2001). MPs, and their constituents, may use the Internet in different ways from other economic and social sectors.

Diffusion of innovation may help explain the bandwagon effect for MPs (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005), that some new technologies reach a ‘critical mass’ because members of a society believe they must be seen to adopt a new technology largely because others have already done so. However, diffusion of innovation theory has limitations for our research as it cannot fully explain the growth and use of the Internet by all MPs. The community of MPs is small with only 658 individuals, which could mean that factors not taken into account within diffusion theory, such as interpersonal relationships, will have a greater effect. Moreover, MPs do not necessarily respond to innovations in the same way as consumers. As political actors, MPs may not just assess a new innovation on the basis of personal gratification. MPs are likely to also consider how any innovation helps them conduct their role more efficiently or effectively. It is possible that as an individual they might like an innovation, but reject it because it does not help them as an MP or *vice versa*. Furthermore, mapping the adoption of an innovation does not in itself explain its impact on political communication and the representative process. Diffusion of innovation does not address the impacts of innovation. Therefore, diffusion of innovation provides a partial framework for understanding why MPs adopted the Internet, but we also need to consider the peculiarities of this very atypical community of 658 individuals. The typology outlined in 4.4.2 takes into account the nature of MPs to explain the use and impact of the Internet.

2.3.2 The impact of technology

The impact of technology on society, the economy and politics can be negligible, augmentory or transformative. Quantitative change which helps people or organisations conduct existing tasks quicker, cheaper or with improved performance are augmentory, whereas those which qualitatively change the way people think or conduct tasks are transformative (Kiesler 1997, Castells 2002). Kiesler (1997) suggests a technology can have both impacts, but that any quantitative changes may be apparent before the qualitative. Technologies may enable MPs to make improvements in how they conduct their duties augment their roles, but some also encourage MPs to change how they work, or their goals, transform their role.

It is generally accepted that new technologies can change both the physical and social worlds (Cairncross 2001). Perhaps of more importance is to understand what happens once a new technology is successfully introduced. Downes and Mui's Law of Disruption (2000) (Figure 2.1) suggests that there is a clear and consistent pattern in response to such changes. They believe that the first sector to respond to new technologies are technologies themselves, and then society is the second quickest to respond, where individuals make use of these technologies to enhance their individual and collective well-being. Third to respond is the commercial world which wishes to make profits by promoting products from this technology that consumers will purchase. By far the slowest sector to respond to new technologies is the political, which appears to only adopt new technologies once society and the economy have proved that they have a value. The logic of Downes and Mui's theory is different to that of professionalism (Negrine 2007). With the former we would expect MPs adoption of the Internet to be relatively slow, and its use largely shaped by the experience of others, but the latter points to a quicker response and that it is tailored to their own specific needs.



Downes and Mui's Law of Disruption (figure 2.1)

2.3.3 *The impact of technology on society*

If Downes and Mui are correct, then any impact a new technology has on society will have wider implications, and this will in turn influence how the commercial and political sectors respond to it. If we reject technological determinism, the relationship between technology and society is not just one-way, but also includes the impact of society on each technology. Indeed, Braun (1995, p21) suggests that “*Technology is a social construct*”, so how a new technology develops is influenced by the values and institutions of each different society in which it takes place. Society reflects the institutions, values, language and working practices of each culture, and how the individuals who comprise that society interact. Agre (2002) argues that political activities are embedded in larger social processes, and therefore reflect the tensions within society. As diffusion theory suggests (Rogers 1995), the development of new technologies shapes, and is shaped by, the societies in which they exist.

Technological change takes place within a social setting, and this helps to explain why some developments rather than others are applied (Winston 1998). One of the main effects of communication technology is on the time and space within which communication takes place. McLuhan's concept of a 'global village' suggests that electronic technology has changed the way people interact (McLuhan 1967). Moreover, McLuhan noted in the phrase the 'medium is the message', that the communication medium as well as the message

conveyed has an impact upon society's culture. Technological innovations such as the telegraph, telephone and radio have changed the nature of the societies in which they operate (Winston 1998). Such technologies have helped inform individuals so that they can consider issues within a changing environment (Boyle *et al.* 1984). Other technologies, such as the bicycle by making transport cheap and easy gave women practical freedoms, and so encouraged greater equality within society (Broers 2005). New technologies can have an effect on how people work, but there is disagreement as to what that effect is. Braun (1995) suggests that technology is often viewed as as a means of reducing human toil and hence enhancing happiness. But Hill (2005) counters by observing that new technologies frequently increase the pace of life and add to stress at work. Whilst each technological change has a slightly different effect on society, Boheme and Stehr (1986) claim that modern society owes itself to technological change. For example, they suggest that society has shifted from one based on labour and property in industrial society, to one now based on knowledge. Technological change has had an effect on how communication takes place, influenced power relationships and affected working behaviour.

2.3.4 The impact of technology on politics

Technology is not neutral, rather it shapes political structures by promoting particular values (Buckstein 1997, Street 2001, Johnson 2006). Street (1992) believes that technology can have both tangible and intangible impact on politics. He identified six tangible effects which include the dependence upon each technology and life chances. The intangibles include shaping worldviews, and how citizens think and act. Technology serves political interests which drive the relationship between technology and politics (Winner 1985, Rogers 1995, Castells 2002). Technology may help maintain or change existing power structures. MPs' use of a technology may shift their relationship *vis-à-vis* other political institutions, such as political parties.

From the late 1970s, political scientists began to consider the effect that computer technology might have. The response to the potential impact of computers on the political process could be characterised into three separate approaches. First, those who were fearful of the consequences which they felt might reduce freedom and privacy (Stone and Warner 1969). The logic of this interpretation is that if information was power, those who controlled the sharing of information through computers would grow ever-more powerful. Second, the optimists who felt that computer technology would be used to benefit society (Downing 1989). For example, Abramson *et al.* (1988) suggested that the speed and extent of

information sharing engendered by computers would lead to more individualised and interactive communication. Indeed, parties have used computers for communicating to both internal audiences such as members, and external audiences such as voters since the 1980s (Smith 1998). The third approach, posited that computer technology would lead to unique political processes and discourse. For example, Laudon (1974) suggested that we might be moving towards a 'managerial democracy', whereby computers would be used by government officials to make rational decisions which would de-politicise many government functions. This debate took place before the Internet became part of the public and political consciousness.

The normalisation, or reinforcement, hypothesis suggests that technology is a tool by which existing power structures and relationships are reinforced (Bellamy and Raab 1999). Therefore, any new technology is used by the existing power elites to cement their position (Laudon 1977). For example, Danzier *et al.* (1982) considered the impact of computers on the distribution of power in American local government. They concluded that computers were a 'conservative technology', and so reinforced existing power relationships. Opposing normalisation is the equalisation, or level playing field, hypothesis. This suggests that new technologies can provide a voice, influence or power to those sectors of society who feel that they are not being listened to.

Technology can have an impact on a range of political institutions, and Parliament's response appears to be historically consistent. Coleman (1999a) explains how Parliament, after initial resistance, adapted for its own needs the use of technologies such as the printing press and telephone. He suggests that Parliament's response to each of these technologies has consistent patterns. Initially, Parliament distrusted these technologies, then reluctantly they were accepted and finally became an inherent part of how Parliament worked. This analysis contradicts diffusion theory by suggesting that MPs will have initially viewed the Internet as largely irrelevant to them, before gradually adopting it. This approach is mechanistic because it assumes that all parts of the Internet will definitely be accepted by all MPs eventually.

2.4 Online Political Communication

Having set the context by looking at the possible overall effects on society and politics of technological change, this section will consider the actual and potential impact of the Internet.

2.4.1 *Online diffusion*

The principles outlined in offline diffusion have been widely applied to the Internet (Rai *et al.* 1998, Wolcott *et al.* 2001, Eastin 2002). However, there is limited research on this model's use in the political sphere. Rose (2005) suggests that the level of e-governance within a country reflects a combination of the demand for social and human capital, and the supply provided by its IT infrastructure. More specific to political campaigning, Ayres (1999) suggests that the Internet is diffusing protest ideas and tactics. This would imply that online diffusion is helping to facilitate political discussion and engagement. However, Ayers also highlights a potential downside of cyber-diffusion, namely that it can also promote rumour and untruths, and create what he refers to as a global electronic riot.

The ability to identify which MPs are quickest to adopt the Internet, and why, supports the use of diffusion of innovations theory. However, we must take into account the specific context of the political process which may shape the relevance of diffusion of innovations. In particular, political factors may play a disproportionate role in explaining the different rates of access to the Internet. For example, Milner (2006) has suggested that authoritarian governments, who fear they will lose control of information dissemination, are more likely to block the introduction of the Internet. One other possible difference is that the Internet may create a number of 'S' curves over time because of the rapidly changing nature of the technology (Mason and Hacker 2003). As professionals, MPs may have to quickly master a range of technical skills in order to make best use of a rapidly evolving online communication.

2.4.2 *The digital divide*

Linking to diffusion theory in understanding the impact of the Internet is the digital divide. The easiest measurement of this divide is merely how many people in any given country are online ⁽³⁾. However, the digital divide is not simply a matter of the percentage of the population who are online. Although the total number of people with access to the Internet is increasing, certain sections of society are more likely to be online than others. A Mori Poll conducted just after the 2001 General Election found that those disproportionately online are

young people, higher socio-economic groups, those with higher education and Liberal Democrat voters (Coleman 2001d). Gibson *et al.* (2002) used a NOP survey to suggest that Internet users are white, highly educated and higher social and economic status. The older and poorer, who often provide the bulk of an MP's casework, are under-represented online. As a consequence, Tolbert *et al.* (2002) refer to a democratic divide. In addition to this socio-economic digital divide, Hindman (2002) has identified in the U.S. an ideological divide. He claims, alongside Rogers, that liberals are more likely to engage in websites than conservatives. The Internet, therefore, does not yet represent an advance in political representation for all citizens.

The impact that the Internet has had on political participation is contested. The bulk of the research so far suggests that the digital divide reflects a much wider divide in political participation. The Internet is viewed as an additional campaigning and communication channel for those who are already politically active (Norris 2001), and so helps them expand and deepen their range of participation (Weber and Bergman 2001, Gibson *et al.* 2003b, Lusoli and Ward 2004). A MORI poll for the Hansard Society found that in 2001 the Internet was unlikely to increase voting turnout because of the large number of young people online, the very group least likely to vote (Coleman and Hall 2001). If this is the case, the Internet would be a good channel for reaching an MP's supporters such as Party members, but less useful for reaching all constituents.

However, there is some evidence that this reinforcement view is being challenged. In America, the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (2004) identified a separate body of online political activists. Online Political Citizens (OPCs) are defined by whether they visited a candidate or party website, or whether they took part in two out of six online political activities. The authors suggest that OPCs are a small, disproportionately influential and highly communicative group of people. Most importantly they identified that 44% of these online 'influentials' had not been politically active before. OPCs are primarily white, highly educated, male and with a high socio-economic status. In the UK, research suggests that a very different group is getting politically active online for the first time. Gibson *et al.* (2002) have identified a very small subset of 15-24 years olds engaging in online politics, but who have not been involved in traditional offline political activity. The Internet may offer MPs a route for reaching constituents beyond their core support.

Gibson *et al.*'s. (2002) research explains why there is a difference between the two views. They found that there are two factors which influence online political participation. Probably the most important of these two is a pre-existing interest in politics. This explains why most research views the Internet as reinforcing and enhancing existing political activity. The second is receiving e-stimulus. Receivers of email, visitors to websites and discussion forums may respond to what they see and read, and this is the process by which they become politicised online. This means that what political actors, such as MPs, do online may have an effect on political participation.

2.4.3 The impact of the Internet on society

As with the introduction of previous technologies, the Internet has been heralded by some as a source of major societal change (Norris 2001). Castells (1996) even suggests that the impact of the Internet will be equal to that of the creation of the alphabet. One school of thought suggests that the Internet has helped free people by breaking down the barriers of geography, and encouraging new communities to form on the basis of common interest (Rheingold 1993, Katz and Aspden 1997, Rheingold 2000, Castells 2002). Opposing this is a view that the Internet has isolated users from society (Stoll 1995, Turkle 1997). For example, the architect Mitchell (2000) drew the analogy that the traditional village well was where people met and discussed issues of interest, but that the Internet is akin to a piped water system so people do not need to physically meet. Indeed, one early research project by Kraut *et al.* (1998) found that heavy users of the Internet became less socially involved, and lonelier than light users of the Internet. However, as their longitudinal study continued Kraut *et al.* (2003) found that the Internet had a positive effect on users' sociability. Other research projects have also found that online contact supplemented face-to-face contact, social interaction and civic participation offline (Robinson *et al.* 2000, Katz *et al.* 2001, Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002, Wellman *et al.* 2002, Gunther *et al.* 2003). If Downes and Mui's (2000) analysis is correct, then the effect of the Internet on society provides the context in which MP's use the Internet.

A number of commentators have suggested that we are entering a network society (Rheingold 2000, Wellman 2001, Castells 2002, Hassan 2004), where what matters is the informal and formal networks which individuals, groups and organisations develop. As with the technological determinists, Castells believes that industrial society is being replaced by an information society. Unlike the technological determinists, this approach suggests that the state and other political actors can play a vital role in shaping the uses of the Internet in each

country. The network society implies that MPs can shape the nature of their relationship with constituents using online communications.

One area where there appears to be a consensus is that the Internet will have an effect upon the work-life balance. By reducing the obstacle of geography, the Internet is potentially blurring the distinction between work and home (Cairncross 2001). Work is an area which previous technology changes have had an influence, but Hill (2005) suggests that what is different is the speed of communication the Internet fosters. As a result pressure may increase on people to work more at home, to create what George (2003) has termed 'white collar sweatshops.' Indeed, Autor (2001) predicts that workers will spend more time working on the Internet at home, and less in the physical office space. However, research suggests that the impact of the Internet on workload is neutral (Gunther 2003). The Internet may be changing working patterns, but not necessarily increasing individual workload.

However, there is a clearer consensus of the impact of one aspect of the Internet, email, on working practices. Research in both the U.S. and the UK indicates that email has now become an important and integral part of working life (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005). Although using slightly different samples ⁽⁴⁾ both projects have a number of shared findings. Email, they suggest, is beginning to replace many traditional workplace communication channels such as the telephone, in part because it has generated some efficiency gains. The findings suggest that email is much better at disseminating information, which in turn has improved overall organisational communication. Fallows' (2002) research specifically suggests that email is less effective at handling sensitive issues, which could be a problem for MPs when dealing with constituents' grievances and complex policy discussions. Overall, both projects conclude that email is changing the nature of workplace communication.

Respondents to both projects believed the sending and receiving of email to be manageable, and that it did not significantly increase their workload. Rather, individual workers have developed their own systems for managing email that minimises any detrimental effects. For example, respondents prioritised which emails they opened by name of the sender (Tassabehji and Vakola 2005). However, Tassabehji and Vakola (2005) suggest there is scope for improving the precautions taken when transmitting confidential information, which could be apposite to an MP's communications. These two projects suggest that email will enhance an MP's ability to communicate, and not at a cost of extra work.

The use of email at work is not consistent amongst all types of staff. Fallows (2002) identified 'power emailers' whose behaviour towards email is different from other staff. These 'power emailers' have higher education, higher incomes and work in managerial/professional roles. Comprising 20% of the sample, they typically deal with 30-50 emails each day. They feel in control of email, value it highly, are more likely to work on email out of the office, use it as an integrated communication channel and are quick to respond to inbound email. The one negative feature Fallows identifies is that a quarter of the 'power emailers' believe they work more because of email. If MPs, or their staff, are 'power emailers' this will shape their use, and the effect, of email.

There is some disagreement over the actual effect of the Internet on society, but in part this is the result of different interpretations of the meaning of the Internet. As discussed in 1.4.1 the Internet has a number of different components. The World Wide Web is an information based mass mediated communication channel, and so is asocial (Kraut *et al.* 2003). However email, like face-to-face communication and the telephone, is an interpersonal channel which encourages social interaction, and therefore, helps develop relationships (Joinson 2003). Moreover, the evidence suggests that it is email use which dominates the Internet (Kraut *et al.* 1999, Castells 2002, Gunther *et al.* 2003), which implies that the Internet has more of a social effect. Whether an MP's online presence is designed to encourage conversation or not will help indicate its impact.

2.5 The Impact of the Internet on Politics

2.5.1 Reinforcement versus equilisation online

The debate begun in the 1970s over the impact of computer mediated communication has intensified. The Internet has significantly increased the size of the school of thought that argues existing political and electoral inequalities are reinforced by new technologies (D'Alessio 1997, Margolis *et al.* 1999, Davis 1999, Margolis and Resnich 2000, Margolis *et al.* 2003, Gibson and McAllister 2003). For example, Agre (1998 pp3-4) suggests that the "*Internet creates little that is qualitatively new, instead it amplifies existing forces.*" The reinforcement hypothesis suggests that the Internet will only be augmentative in its impact. It is important to note, however, that the empirical data supporting the reinforcement hypothesis is the result of research primarily conducted in the U.S., where there is a weak party system. To test the reinforcement hypothesis in a strong party system such as in the

UK, we need to see if MPs tailor technology to suit their own, their constituents or their party's priorities and convenience.

A number of commentators have suggested that the Internet will create a more level playing field (Rheingold 1993, Stone 1996, Gibson and Ward 1997, Bimber 1998a), and therefore its impact will be transformative. As an unmediated communication tool the Internet is viewed as a means of bypassing the media, and so providing a more level playing field. This hypothesis has primarily been used to suggest that the Internet provides smaller political parties with more opportunities to communicate with the electorate (Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2007). However, it could also enable individual MPs to bypass the control of their party elite, strengthen their relationship with constituents, and so enhance representative democracy. To test the normalisation hypothesis we need to see which MPs are online, what they use it for and with what effect on their constituents.

Related to the reinforcement versus equalisation hypothesis is a debate on the values underpinning the Internet. One approach stresses that the World Wide Web was created ⁽⁵⁾ as means for making information freely available, and thus providing an alternative to information flows controlled by political elites (Castells 2002, Van Dijk 2006). Johnson (2006), however, suggests that the Internet is a commercial enterprise based on the profit motive, and is therefore inhabited by consumers and not citizens. A probably more accurate analysis is that outlined in 1.4.2, where each stage of the development of the Internet has been dominated by different groups including the U.S. government, the academic community, social movements and commercial enterprises. As Chadwick (2006) notes, any new political practices are conditioned by the competing interests which have shaped the Internet. How MPs and their users view their online presence will indicate which approach has shaped the use of the Internet by elected representatives.

2.5.2 The growth of online political communication

Political parties were fairly quick to develop websites. Studies in the UK (Ward and Gibson 1998), Italy (Newell (2001) and the USA (Sednow 1998) all suggest that the prime motive was a bandwagon effect, with a secondary influence the desire to appear 'modern'. As one political party provided a website, their rivals quickly follow suit. This 'domino effect' (Ward and Gibson 1998) suggests that the expansion of political websites is not due to any cost-benefit analysis. Internet diffusion, therefore, was shaped by the fact that political actors did not wish to appear to be slower than their rivals in adopting the new technology.

However, there is evidence that political parties are slowly moving from this initial bandwagon phase, towards one where the Internet is a coherent part of the political communication process (Gibson *et al.* 2003).

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the use of the Internet was a novelty; having a website might demonstrate that a politician/political party is modern, rather than evidence of a coherent communications strategy (Ward and Gibson 1998). The first recorded example of a politician's website was by Senator Teddy Kennedy in 1993 (Johnson 2001), and the first use of email by a politician was Jerry Brown in 1992 (Johnson 2001). The U.S. Presidential candidates of 1996 did provide websites, but they were very basic (Davis 1999). For many politicians websites were initially a gimmick. Despite muted enthusiasm originally (Ward and Gibson 1998), by the 2001 UK General Election the Internet had become a recognised campaign communication tool in Britain. The growth of political websites has continued at a rapid rate (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005).

Although not explicit, one common school of thought considers a cost-benefit analysis of the Internet. D'Alessio (1997) points out that generally all organisations adopt a new technology because they believe that the quantifiable benefits outweigh the known costs. This approach depends upon empirical evidence that the Internet helps win votes, raises funds and mobilise support. Whilst there is some evidence that the Internet can raise funds and mobilise support in the U.S. (Johnson 2004, Lusoli & Ward 2005, Williams *et al* 2005), there is no evidence yet that this applies to the UK. As a result, MPs have to make their own judgement of the relevance of online communication to their representative role and re-election prospects.

2.5.3 Online election campaigns

Websites have primarily been studied as part of an election campaign. Within such campaigns, communication has been largely asymmetric, that is, primarily aimed at benefiting the sender rather than the receiver of the message (though the actual benefit is unproven). In Western Europe and America, websites have been used by parties and candidates as one-way communication tools, providing information about policies and activities (Faucheux 1998, Norris 2001, Bentivegna 2002, Gibson, Ward and Lusoli 2003, Ward and Gibson 2003, Gibson and Rommelle 2003). For example, US politicians have used the Web to secure funds and attract volunteers for their election campaigns (Puopolo 2001, King 2002). Looking at the German Federal elections, Gibson and Rommelle (2003) point out that parties and candidates pour money into their websites in the run-up-to, and

during, the election campaign, but once the election is over such websites receive few additional resources. MPs' websites exist, however, outwith of election campaigns and offer a different perspective on why, how and with what effect MPs use the Internet.

The Web may help generate fundraising and develop volunteer networks (Foot and Schneider 2002), especially where the party system is weak as in the U.S., but there is limited evidence that politicians believe it wins votes. A study by the E-Voter Institute (2002) found that political consultants believed the Web was more effective at motivating existing supporters, than acquiring new ones. Interviews of the staff of the 33 most marginal Congressional seats by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (2002), found that respondents were evenly divided as to whether they would put more effort into Web campaigning next time. Looking at the Australian General Election of 2001, Gibson and McAllister (2003) suggest that the impact of the Web on vote-winning is very subtle. Rather than overtly securing votes, they suggest that an effective website is a signal of a well-run campaign, so the Web's electoral importance is in its symbolism of the type of politician providing a website.

The American literature suggests that there is growing evidence of the benefits of the Web for politicians. However, in the UK there is much less data that the Web has had an impact during election campaigns. Ken Livingstone did indeed turn to the Internet during the 2000 London Mayoral election; however, his situation was unusual for the UK. Having been expelled from the Labour Party, he found himself a well-known politician without the backup of a political party. There is a consensus among commentators that the Web was of marginal impact in the 1997 and 2001 General Elections (Gibson and Ward 1998, Electoral Commission 2001, Coleman 2001a, Coleman 2001c, Ballinger 2002, Ward and Gibson 2003). The UK experience of the Internet, like its party system, appears to be different to that of the U.S.

2.5.4 The direction of online political communication

Online political communication can be mapped across a simple matrix. The horizontal axis refers to Internet communication between networks of citizens (Hale 2003). Horizontal communication encompasses any communication within and between groups, for example, pressure groups, party members and citizens. In terms of such communication online we would expect the development of a shared community created by, for example, user groups. Such communication might be considered to be more 'democratic', in that the relationship between those participating is likely to be of equals. The vertical axis is top-down from political parties and/or individual politicians to citizens. As such, communication is

essentially providing information to, persuading or mobilising the receiver. The most likely Internet channels are websites and possibly e-newsletters. Horizontal communication is more likely to encourage a dialogue, whereas vertical communication is more likely to be a monologue. Research by Lusoli and Ward (2004) of e-communication by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, suggests that the Internet is more likely to facilitate vertical communication from parties to their key internal and external audiences, rather than horizontal communication between party members. Online vertical communication is one-way, top-down from MP to constituent. Online horizontal communication implies some dialogue between an MP and constituents.

2.5.5 *E-democracy*

Over the past twenty years there has been growing interest in political decision making circles of the value of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Barber 1984, Abramson *et al.* 1988, McLean 1989). The introduction of the Internet has accelerated interest in the idea of e-democracy. Since the early 1990s, a number of optimists have suggested that this new technology may transform the way in which citizens and governments communicate (Rheingold 1993, Grossman 1995, Negroponte 1995, Budge 1996, Rash 1997).

The supporters of e-democracy are divided between those who believe that it heralds a new form of democracy, and so is transformative, and those who assert that the Internet merely improves existing forms of political discourse, and will be augmentory. The difference between the two schools of thought is over whether direct or representative democracy is the appropriate response to the problem of a democratic deficit (Bellamy and Raab 1999). Aristotle suggested that the ideal size for a democracy should be limited by the amount of land a man could travel in a day. The hope, for some commentators, is that the Internet by fundamentally changing the way politicians and citizens communicate with each other, opens up the possibility of direct e-democracy, as inspired by Habermas' concept of the public sphere (Moore 1999). Therefore, how far a man can walk in a day is replaced by how often a person can click in a day.

Other commentators suggest that the Internet has revolutionary properties, that it can fundamentally alter the relationship between governed and government (Grossman 1995, Negroponte 1995) primarily due to three factors. First, the Internet provides almost limitless information so that citizens can make fully informed opinions (Budge 1996); this will encourage the sharing of ideas (Rheingold 1993). Second, the Internet has the potential to

create virtual communities that will not be influenced by pre-Internet power relationships. Third, the power of interactivity could make representatives redundant as citizens communicate directly with government and bureaucracies (Morris 2003). Critics use three points to refute these arguments. First, more information does not necessarily equate to better information (Kampden and Snijkers 2003). Second, the cost of collective action prevents full mobilisation (Bimber 1998b). Third, the evidence shows that politicians have used the Web primarily for information provision, and not as a participation tool (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). New technologies do not automatically change the political process.

A number of commentators reject the e-democracy model and suggest that the Internet will enhance representative democracy. This school of thought can be divided into two separate approaches: the macro; and the micro. The macro approach, closely associated with the Hansard Society, stresses the impact of the interactive nature of the Internet on the relationship between citizens and the overall representative system, particularly Parliament (Coleman 2001d, Ward and Lusoli 2005). The micro approach focuses specifically on the relationship between individual representatives and their constituents. This suggests that not only is the Internet enhancing representative democracy, it is in fact changing the nature of representative democracy. Coleman (1999) points out that the Internet is strengthening the 'middle man' because it allows direct communication between an MP and constituents. The unmediated nature of the Internet has led Zittel (2002) to suggest that political parties are being bypassed, and so improve the relationship between representatives and their constituents (Blumler and Coleman 2001). In part, this is due to the Internet encouraging direct communication between elector and elected. The problem with this approach is that the evidence so far has suggested that the online communication between MPs and their constituents is not a two-way dialogue (Coleman 2001b, Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). Rather than a model of e-democracy, some commentators have considered what may become the basis of a model of e-representation.

2.6 The Impact of the Internet on Citizens

2.6.1 Citizen engagement

Some citizens participate in civil activity, so that, instead of just being private individuals, they take part in an activity where they are not the only, or even primary, beneficiary. Della Carpini (2000) has identified a wide range of 'standard indicators' of civic engagement

which can be grouped under three headings. First, a positive worldview, whereby a citizen trusts other citizens and has a sense of identity within a wider society. Such civic engagement is more a state of mind, that the individual belongs to a wider society, rather than any specific activity. Those who do not exhibit this sense of belonging, it is said, feel marginalised or alienated. Second, participation in community organisations which could vary from membership, occasional volunteering through to an organising role. Many participants might not even consider such activity to be civic engagement as it is often non-political or non-confrontational, such as organising a local fete. Third, a knowledge, interest or involvement in public affairs. Della Carpini (2000) suggests this can include a wide range of activities from merely reading a newspaper and watching the news, through to voting or getting involved with a pressure group or political party. It is this third level which is usually most closely associated with political behaviour. Civic engagement includes a wide range of activities from the fairly passive through to the very active, and it may be either political or non-political. Visiting an MP's online presence is indicative of low-level political engagement.

Each civic engagement activity, such as being a trade union member, organising a youth group or belonging to a charity, in itself might have a limited effect. However, collectively such disparate activities comprise social capital, the well-being of society as a whole. Civic engagement acts as a social bond (Norris and Curtice 2004) which it is argued constitutes the foundation of local communities and democratic governance. This implies that there is a sense of connection between citizens. Civic engagement is the invisible cement which brings together different communities within one overall social infrastructure (Putnam 2000). Although often of a non-political nature, civic engagement plays a key background role in the ability of politicians to represent their constituents. Within a society with low levels of civic engagement, communication from an individual politician will have a limited impact because citizens are not interested in public affairs.

The widely accepted view amongst sociologists and political scientists is that over the past thirty years there has been a general decline in civic engagement in liberal democracies (Norris and Curtice 2004). There is general agreement that this decline has been especially acute amongst younger people (Mazzoleni 2000, Della Carpini 2000). Putnam (2000) found that the decline was greatest amongst the better educated. This perceived decline in civic engagement, and an accompanying democratic deficit, is causing commentators concern. In

a period of increasing education and skills development in most liberal democracies, Della Carpini's framework cannot explain this decline in civic engagement.

A number of different explanations for a growing sense of civic disillusionment have been put forward. One view is that a crisis in liberalism has created the growth of individualism which undermines the connective nature of civic engagement (Mazzoleni 2000). An alternative view suggests that it is the communication process, in the form of political marketing, which has led to a focus on the individual at the expense of society (Turow 1997, Putnam 2000). Focusing specifically on Britain, Pattie *et al.* (2004) suggests that there are a number of factors which are reducing the willingness of citizens to co-operate: increased geographical mobility; the decline of religion; the weakening of class solidarity; and the growth of a 'market state'. Each of these approaches suggests that social, economic, political and technological developments are moving society towards a more individualistic form. If this is the case, communication from politicians will have to be tailored to the needs of each individual citizen.

Not all commentators, however, believe that these developments suggest civic engagement is in decline. Rather, one school of thought suggests that one type of civic engagement is being replaced by another. In this new form of civic engagement citizenship is increasingly based around consumption (Giddens 1991, Bennett 1998, Scammell 2001). Consumer behaviour is increasingly adding to civic participation through its focus on environmental and ethical concerns, and the consequent growth of 'accelerated pluralism' (Bimber 1998a, Moloney 2000). Communication by politicians, therefore, needs to reflect that the recipient is the citizen-consumer not the citizen-voter. This change of status may have a significant impact on the relationship with MPs if constituents demand more of them.

2.6.2 Online citizen engagement

The nature of the Internet has generated interest in its potential to enhance civic engagement (Negroponte 1995, Grossman 1995, Browning 1996, Morris 2000). The explanation for this is that flows in information shape the level and type of civic engagement. The logic, therefore, is that the Internet is a more efficient and effective means of sharing information, which in turn influences whether and how citizens participate (Bimber 2001, Shah *et al.* 2005). The enhanced ability the Internet provides in sharing information alters the social landscape (Fisher and Wright 2001). However, there is a disagreement as to whether or not the Internet has increased participation, with a number of commentators suggesting that it has

merely reinforced existing levels of participation (Bimber 2001, Norris 2001). The numerical weight of evidence currently suggests that researchers believe that the Internet is enhancing participation, even if only for some citizens. Research suggests that the Internet has a positive effect on political participation (Weber *et al.* 2003, Jennings and Zeitner 2003). The specific areas of activity which the Internet facilitates include donating money (Bimber 2001), likelihood of voting (Tolbert and Mcneal (2003) and supporting voluntary organisations (Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002). In addition, the geographical nature of such participation is becoming more dispersed, especially the use of email (Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002). The research is not yet conclusive, and does not necessarily suggest that the use of the Internet by MPs will automatically enhance engagement in their constituencies.

There are three main approaches to online civic engagement: the optimists; realists; and the agnostics. The optimists suggest that the Internet is helping to transform citizen engagement, but not within the traditional political structures. Rather, the Internet is enhancing citizen-consumer action (Scammell 2001). This argument suggests that the Internet has been the communication channel by which consumers receive information and activists mobilise (Klein 1999). Power will move to the citizen-consumer online (Scammell 2000). The realists suggest that the Internet has led to specific, but limited improvement in civic engagement, for example, that is attractive to those pre-disposed to single-issue politics (Norris and Curtice 2004). Katz and Rice (2002) suggest that the Internet has led to incremental change because voters still rely on traditional media to get most of their political information. None of the realists are suggesting that the Internet is radically altering citizen engagement. The agnostics argue that the Internet is merely a technology, and cannot in itself radically change society (Street 2001). For example, Bimber (2000) suggests that what is important is how information is shared, rather than focusing on one specific technology. MPs are faced with at least three possible options: considering online constituents as consumers; addressing their online presence primarily to supporters; or addressing how as an MP they secure, manage and use information.

2.7 Summary

Political communication since the 1960s has been dominated by mass communication channels, but the Internet provides an alternative channel, one which communicates directly with citizens and voters. Since the Internet began to play a role in the political sphere in 1993, any changes to traditional political communication have been contested. In particular, debate over the normalisation versus equalisation hypotheses, whether the Internet can

enhance participation and its possible effect on democracy are still ongoing. However, we can identify certain traits in online political communication which help shape MPs' use of the Internet. The Internet potentially encourages enhanced interactivity between electors and elected. This in turn has raised the possibility of greater use of horizontal communication, at the expense of vertical communication. Although it has not necessarily led to an increase in workloads, MPs cannot escape the fact that the Internet has changed the way many people work. In addition, as professionals MPs will have to learn a number of new skills, so they can master the different modalities of the Internet. Perhaps most fundamentally, the Internet provides MPs with a communication channel they can control, which suggests they will need to consider strategically how they communicate to constituents, other political actors and a global audience. However, any impact of the Internet should be viewed within a context of society and politics. Therefore, an MP's online communication strategy will be shaped by the views of both MPs, and their users, on any Internet presence MPs provide.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) A literature search found that there are over 3,000 articles which address the diffusion of innovations.
- (2) They are: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, Laggards.
- (3) There is some difference between the exact figures for online access, which is largely explained by how researchers determine what online access actually means. A number of different precise definitions are included, for example does it mean home access only, home and work access, home, work and elsewhere access? Whichever is the answer, there is general agreement amongst different tabulators of the figures in terms of general trends of Internet usage.
- (4) Fallows research for the Pew Internet and American Life Project was based on a telephone survey of 2,447 American Internet users during April-May 2002. Tassebehji and Vakola's research was based on an email questionnaire of 600 employees at 50 UK based organisations conducted between 2002 and 2004.
- (5) For example, it is pointed out that Tim Berners-Lee who created the World Wide Web did not take out any commercial Patents because he wanted this communication media freely available to all. Therefore he did not view the Internet as a commercial enterprise.

CHAPTER 3

MPs AND THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

“The English people believes itself to be free; it is grossly mistaken, it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing.” Jean Jacques Rousseau (1977 p141) ⁽¹⁾

3.1 Introduction

In their role as elected representatives MPs are communicators, indeed Coleman (2005) suggests that representation is a communicative process. MPs may have policies, ideologies and ambitions, but they need to communicate these to a wide range of audiences to be successful. MPs who are poor communicators are unlikely to have the interest, respect and support of their peers, party organisation or electors. MPs are communicating a number of different messages to both internal (party and parliamentary) and external (citizens, constituents, media and pressure groups) audiences at the same time. An MP is a member of the persuasion business.

3.2 Representation – The Relationship Between MPs and Their Constituents

3.2.1 What is representation?

There is no consensus on the exact meaning of political representation: indeed Pitkin (1967) suggests that it is a single concept with four types, whereas Mansbridge (2003) suggests there are four concepts of political representation. A starting point has been provided by Birch (1971) who suggests that the term ‘representation’ has three different meanings. The first concerns those who are agents of a principal, the second is those who share characteristics of a particular group they represent, and the third those who symbolises the identity of a group. As Birch (1971) suggests that the third meaning is very rare, we will focus on the first two. The first ‘fault line’ in any discussion of political representation is on the importance of individual elected representatives. The collective approach, as associated with the UK, suggests that representation is based on dominant political parties (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). The individualist approach, as commonly associated with the U.S., stresses the importance to voters of what the individual politician says on issues and policies (Miller and Stokes 1963). Refining this analysis, Searing (1985) suggested that there are two dimensions to representation, the national which focuses on policy, and the constituency which focuses on the redress of grievance. The second ‘fault line’ focuses on the link between a representative and those they represent. For example,

social representation reflects the extent to which both the elected and elector share the same socio-economic characteristics (Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). However, in the UK most commentators suggest that in terms of occupation, education, gender and race MPs are not socially representative (Adonis 1990). The representative nature of MPs can be assessed by how much freedom of action they enjoy, and the nature of their relationship with constituents.

Although slow to change, political representation does not remain static in any country. Looking at France, Great Britain and the U.S., Birch (1971) identified social and economic revolutions over several centuries which shaped the nature of political representation in each of these countries. For example, in the UK questions over the role of the monarchy, state and Empire played a key role in the development of the 'Westminster Model'. These movements should not be viewed in isolation, rather they are the result of specific interests arguing their case. Political representation is analogous to a modern-day seaborne oil tanker: it takes the application of significant pressure to change its' direction. If the Internet proves to be transformative then it may lead to changes in the representative system.

Representation has evolved as new interests seek to be heard, and in twentieth century UK, competing interests' needs were served by a strong party system (Coxall and Robins 1998, Perry 1999). However, towards the end of the twentieth century the existing 'Westminster Model' was coming under pressure from electoral dealignment, the break up of the rigid two-party system and the ending of the Cold War (Dunleavy 1999). The Internet may become one of the channels used to further break down existing power relationships.

3.2.2 E-representation

Rehfeld (2005) notes that in most countries the concept of constituency is associated with territory, but he also observes that conceptually this need not be the case. Moreover, in recent years this assumption that representative democracy is based on geography is being actively challenged (Warren and Castiglione 2004, Rehfeld 2005). For example, a number of Proportional Representation election systems exist with a limited geographic link. Bradbury and Mitchell (2007) note that there is a tension between constituency and list members in the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament regarding the work of list members. As a consequence of such

developments the concept of representation may be evolving. If geographical representation is no longer an essential component of representation, then MPs could, in theory, represent citizens on the basis of common interest, and not on where they live. Whilst MPs are elected by their constituents, and by convention handle the casework of only those who live in their constituency, the idea of a non-geographic constituency existing alongside the geographic is possible. Indeed, MPs who specialise in particular policy fields frequently get involved with issues beyond the confines of their constituency (Rush 2001). Theoretically, therefore, MPs could represent individuals who come together online on the basis of common interests/issues.

This debate on the possible loosening of the influence of geography, with the potential for the development of non-geographic representation has yet to fully crystallise. As a result the idea of either a separate or parallel concept of e-representation ⁽²⁾ needs further consideration. Two sources which made reference to e-representation assumed that the concept automatically existed by focusing on the tools of e-representation, namely email and websites (Pole 2004, Gibson *et al.* 2007). Neither actually investigated the concept of e-representation, rather they just used the term. Chen (2005) suggests that email helped ‘virtual representatives’ to communicate more efficiently, but noted that it was not relevant to all situations. The only source to consider the concept of e-representation is Lusoli (2007), whose exploratory research suggested that any such concept would include direct participation, sending and receiving information and the encouragement of a debate. Hence, any shift in the concept of representation requires an understanding of the views of both MPs and online constituents.

Lusoli’s work and Coleman’s (2005) idea of direct representation, suggest that a framework exists for evaluating the concept of e-representation:

- 1) Does an online constituency exist? This could either be a parallel constituency comprised of an MP’s constituents who prefer to interact with them online, a separate e-constituency comprised of people who do not live in an MP’s constituency, but with whom they communicate regularly with online, or a mixture of both.
- 2) Do opportunities exist for citizens and MPs to initiate communication, and engage with one another online?

- 3) Does a conversation develop from any online contact, and not just the provision of information?

E-representation implies not just enhancing but changing each individual MP's role.

3.2.3 Representative versus direct democracy

Throughout the history of Parliament commentators have debated the selection, composition and role of individual MPs. A clear division exists over whether parliamentary representation is an appropriate mechanism for governing. Supporters of parliamentary systems suggest that it is either the most practical, or most desirable, form of democratic government. Whilst this is the majority view, and parliamentary government has been the practice in the UK for several centuries, an alternative view suggests that direct, or participatory, democracy is more desirable.

The roots of direct democracy are perceived to be the Athenian City State, and the public space of the Agora. Here citizens could either take part in the political process at forums, or directly access key decision makers to put their case. This did not mean that as a group citizens ruled, rather they had free and direct access to those that made the decisions. However, the reality is that this ideal did not exist. The number of Athenians who as citizens had these privileges was very small, in proportion to the total population.

Yet, the ideal of direct democracy has remained. Athenian democracy was perceived to be achievable because the limited number of citizens ensured access, and made direct communication possible. More recently, Posner (2003) has suggested that deliberative democracy, based on the Athenian model, is achievable. The logic of Posner's position is that if modern citizens can achieve the level of direct communication possible within the City State, then direct democracy is a practical alternative. Arblaster (2002) and Budge (1996) have also suggested that direct democracy can be achieved through modern technology.

As society and the state became larger and more complex in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, commentators such as Thomas Paine (1969) suggested that representation was necessary because direct democracy was a practical impossibility. However, the history of Parliament demonstrates that the existence of MPs does not necessarily equate to the existence of democratic government (Rush 2001). A number of factors influenced MPs' behaviour: individual patrons (Pickles 1971, Rush 2001), the Party Whips (Rush 2001) and trade union sponsors (Radice *et al.* 1990). Indeed, the electorate in the nineteenth century

was primarily comprised of landowners, industrialists and artisans, and it was not until the 1947 Representation of the People Act that universal suffrage was achieved. Historically, representative government was more about the expression of the narrow interests of a small elite, which gradually expanded into a wider political class, rather than decision-making based on equality of all. E-representation may offer a middle way between the Athenian model and representative democracy.

3.2.4 Trustees versus delegates

Whilst modern parliamentary government is viewed as democratic (Rush 2001), commentators have been divided for over 200 years on the nature of the relationship between individual MPs and electors. The key question has been whether MPs are delegates or trustees. Supporters of the former viewpoint, such as the Levellers, Paine and James Mill viewed MPs as agents (Arblaster 2002). The mandate was considered to be the means by which supporters of an unachievable direct democracy could maintain some level of citizen participation. Mandated MPs are required to identify the views of their constituents (or a particular section of them) and vote accordingly.

However, since the eighteenth century the trustee view has generally been perceived to be ascendant (Rush 2001). Within this Burkean tradition, MPs claimed great freedom of action because their obligation was to the nation, not individual constituents (Pickles 1971). Burke viewed a representative system as an elite, and not a democratic form of government (Rush 2001). MPs were considered to be financially, intellectually and politically independent decision-makers who weighed up the pros and cons of the issues before them. However, the pure Burkean model of independent MPs, if it ever existed, has been whittled away with the development of the party system since the late eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the party organisation, outwith of parliament, came to play an enhanced role in campaigning, policy development and the selection of parliamentary candidates. To have some influence, MPs need to communicate with, and persuade, political colleagues, interested groups and voters.

In addition to national political trends, the scope for independent action by an MP has been challenged from below. Birch (1977, 1993) claims with each subsequent expansion of the franchise, MPs gradually became dependent on constituents for re-election. However, this does not mean that the influence of all voters is equal. Those MPs within a 'safe seat' who are unlikely to be removed by unhappy constituents at the next election can, if they choose,

largely ignore the wishes of their constituents. However, MPs in more marginal seats, where a group of disgruntled constituents could remove the sitting member at the next election, are in a different situation ⁽²⁾. Since the 1960s, greater socio-economic movement has reduced partisanship, so that consequently the number of undecided voters has increased (Sarlvik and Crewe 1983, Rose and McAllister 1986, Denver and Hands 1997). MPs in a marginal seat have to work harder to retain their political support.

The traditional view is that there are only two options, the mandate or the trustee, but there may be evidence of a third approach. With the growth of the constituency role in the post-war period, many MPs spend considerable time involved in non-partisan, non-political activity. This is more about service provision to constituents than either representing the interests of specific groups, or commenting on national policy issues (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). Developments in society and the economy can lead to changes in the representative system as MPs seek to reflect the needs of those who elected them. E-representation may enhance an MPs ability to achieve this.

3.2.5 An MP's link with constituents

Whilst representative democracy may not place the interests of every individual citizen at the heart of decision-making, MPs cannot ignore 'public opinion'. Posner (2003) points out that if sections of the public become alienated, their response may, ultimately, undermine the representative system. Therefore, MPs realise the potential electoral dangers to themselves and the credibility of the representative system, of not consulting regularly with constituents. New technology can enable representatives to communicate more frequently and in different ways, with constituents.

Representative democracy implies that ultimately an MP's closest relationship should be with constituents. The mandated approach suggests that the focus of an MP is solely on identifying and supporting in Parliament the needs of their constituents, or at least one sector of their constituency. The trustee approach suggests that MPs seek to wield influence on behalf of the nation in general. Pitkin (1967) suggested a compromise whereby an MP seeks to represent their constituents underlying interests, but at the same time responding to their specific preferences. Therefore, whilst MPs face competing demands for their attention, individual constituent casework is clearly central to their role. Irrespective of whether they are mandated or trustees, MPs should effectively represent their constituents.

Coleman (2005) suggests that recent political trends are re-conceptualising representation. He argues that the growth, since the 1980s, of a permanent campaign is moving democracy towards direct representation. He suggests that previously representation was based on an electoral contract, essentially formed once every five years, and that in essence, it has failed. Increasingly, he argues that with the fusion of campaigning and representation, there is now a permanent direct representation, which by its very nature is deliberative in nature. Therefore, the link between MP and constituent has become closer. This model may explain why, since the 1960s, MPs appear to have invested so heavily in the relationship with their constituents. Representation, therefore, is based on a conversation between voter and representative (Coleman 2005). If this conversation takes place via the Internet, it might help develop a model of e-representation.

3.3 MP's Duties and Workload

3.3.1 An MP's role

There is no job description for the individual MP (Norton 1994, Radice *et al.* 1990, Power 1998a), and different MPs are likely to focus on different aspects of their job at different points of their career. At least five separate, but not necessarily exclusive, roles can be identified from existing literature. First, the partisan who promotes their party's ideas, policies and image (Searing 1994, Power 1998a, Rush 2001), where MPs act as party cheerleaders by communicating its key messages. Second, the ministerial aspirant (Searing 1994) who seeks to be promoted to the executive, where communication is centred on an MP's peers and the party Whips. Third, scrutinisers of the executive who examine government policy and activity (Searing 1994, Norton 1994, Power 1998a, Rush 2001) which has particularly developed since the reforms of the committee structure started in the late 1960s. Fourth, policy advocates who develop their own policy or issue specialism which they focus much of their efforts on (Power 1998a). By focusing on one or two policy areas MPs hope to have disproportionate influence on policy development. This role has grown as the association between MPs and pressure groups has become closer. Fifth, they represent the views of their constituents at both a policy and individual grievance level (Searing 1994, Norton 1994, Power 1998a, Rush 2001). These roles are not mutually exclusive, and each individual MP does carry out a number of functions at any one time.

3.3.2 The constituency role

Of these five functions, it is the constituency role which has generated most interest in recent years. MPs duties are not static, they evolve over time (Norton 1994), in particular in

response to socio-economic changes in society, the Parliamentary process and the wider political situation. In the 1950s, an MP referred to as 'a good constituency MP' was considered a failure because they had no hope of attaining ministerial rank (Marsh 1985). A backbencher who was content to look after their constituency lacked ambition and was a rarity. The memoirs of a number of MPs elected in the immediate post-war years, provides anecdotal evidence that, in contrast to their predecessors, they were unusual in regularly visiting their constituency (Mitchell 1982). There has been a shift in attitude towards the constituency from one generation of MPs to the next.

From the 1960s, the importance of the constituency role began to gradually change, so that constituencies were carefully nurtured. By 1997 a *House Magazine* survey of the newly elected cohort, found that 86% identified being considered a good constituency MP was the most important part of their job (Power 1998b). Looking at a wider range of MPs in 1994 and 1999, the Study of Parliament Group found a similar response, with an MP's constituency role ranked first of their duties (Rush 2001). These numbers suggest that, if not universal, the importance of the constituency role is generally accepted by MPs of all parties and across a range of seats. From being a fairly neglected part of an MP's *raison d'être*, within fifty years the constituency role appears to have become central to their job.

However, the constituency role is not a new development. Ever since medieval times, MPs have enjoyed a close link with their local area (Birch 1993, Rush 2004). In the nineteenth century, MPs would occasionally conduct the type of constituency casework taken for granted nowadays (Rush 2001). What has changed has been the scale and scope of constituency work (Rush 2001, Rush 2004). A number of studies have suggested that the constituency demands placed upon MPs has significantly increased since the 1960s. Barker and Rush (1970) found that, in the late 1960s, MPs received 25-75 letters per week from constituents. By the late 1980s this figure had more than doubled (Griffith and Ryle 1989). The growth of the constituency role places additional demands on an MP's resources.

MPs are now spending more time on fulfilling their constituency role. A survey by the Top Salaries Review Board found that the amount of time MPs spent on constituency work increased from 11 hours a week in 1971 to 16 hours in 1984 (Norton 1994). By 1992 a sample of MPs estimated this to be 25 hours a week (Norris and Lovenduski 1995), which represented over a third of their working week. By spending more time on constituency affairs, an MP has less time to spend on other activities. As a result, they might neglect

other, possibly more important, activities such as scrutinising the executive (Power 2000). Moreover, as Weinberg *et al.* (1999) note, the growth of constituency workload has contributed to the fact that MPs' levels of stress have increased. As a consequence, MPs will view new technology as a means of handling this growing workload more effectively.

Searing (1994) identifies two components to the constituency role of an MP. First, as a welfare officer MPs seek to find redress for constituents' grievances. This might be fairly detailed and relatively trivial issues such as investigating why a benefit has not been paid to a constituent, through to potentially life-changing actions such as supporting a possible victim of a miscarriage of justice. Second, as a local promoter they seek to further local collective interests. This might include fighting for improvements in the local infrastructure such as roads and schools, and also encouraging employment prospects. As a result, the MP is usually acting as a figurehead lobbying for changes from decision makers. Generally, the constituency role does not involve policy issues and so is unlikely to bring the MP into conflict with their party. However, occasionally the weight of the constituency postbag can convince an MP to suggest a policy change to their political elite.

Norton (1994) suggested that historically there have been seven components of the constituency role. The 'powerful friend' and 'promoter of constituency interests' equates to Searing's welfare officer and local promoter. In the early twentieth century, the two key constituency roles were 'benefactor' which involved helping constituents, sometimes financially, and 'local dignitary'. The latter role was often in conflict with many MPs' focus on Westminster and not on their constituencies. By World War II the 'benefactor' role had largely disappeared and the 'local dignitary' role essentially meant that the MP attended official functions in the constituency. Norton (1994) suggests that the remaining three elements of the constituency role are: to act as a 'safety valve'; 'information provider'; and 'advocate'. The first two of these are very passive, receiving the opinions or requests for information from constituents, and are consistent with Searing's welfare officer. The third, is more active with MPs fighting on behalf of causes, that either affect the constituency or at least have support within the constituency. This latter role accords with Searing's local promoter. Therefore, of the seven possible historical functions of the constituency role, modern MPs provide, at best, five. Both Searing and Norton's approaches provide a means of understanding the importance to MPs of contact with constituents. However, as a framework Searing's will be adopted in this thesis, because Norton's historical based model does not fully explain the existing situation in which MPs find themselves.

To conduct their constituency role, MPs use a range of formal and informal mechanisms such as local surgeries, the constituency mailbag, and attending local party and other functions in the constituency (Norris 1997). Responding to a letter about housing benefit, attending a local fete or going to a local party dinner are all part of the constituency role. Constituency service, therefore, is not limited to just dealing with casework.

Communication is central to how an MP conducts the constituency role. Constituents do not necessarily expect MPs to solve their problem; rather they want to know that they are being listened to. Rawlings (1990) studied 700 enquiries to MPs: 44% involved further information; and 18% wanted confirmation that the matter was in hand. The constituency role is predicated on the need to maintain two-way communication. A MP's favoured tool for dealing with casework is letters to the relevant Minister or local authorities (Norton 1982, Marsh 1985). The concern from many constituents is primarily on details which affect their lives most, rather than some utopian change to policy. Therefore, Posner (2003) has suggested that the relationship between politicians and voters is akin to that of seller and buyer. Therefore, constituency casework can be viewed as part of a political marketplace.

No single factor explains why casework has become more important; rather a number of developments collectively reinforce the importance of constituency casework to both constituents and MPs. The literature suggests that there are six main influences. First, systemic factors such as expansion of the electorate (Pickles 1971, Norton 1995) and development of the welfare state (Radice *et al.* 1990) have brought more people into direct contact with the government apparatus. Second, electoral tactics: with the weakening of class voting since the 1960s, the electorate has become more volatile (Norton 1994, Norton 1995). As a result, MPs cannot automatically assume they will be re-elected. Third, parliamentary changes suggest that MPs have more time on their hands. The growth of the executive's (Cabinet and the Prime Minister) powers at the expense of Parliament's has meant that MPs now have a much more limited impact on policy-making (Norris 1997, Rush 2001). Yet, the growth of the professional politician (Norton 1995) means that more of them need something to do. This view suggests that, outside of the committee structure, the role of individual MPs in the passage of legislation is now primarily to rubber-stamp. Therefore, MPs need to focus their energies elsewhere. Constituency casework gives MPs a purpose, a sense of job satisfaction and a definite outcome (Norton and Wood 1990, Radice *et al.* 1990, Norton 1994, Power 1998a). Fourth, if MPs exist in a political marketplace, demands from

constituents have grown significantly. In part, this is driven by the impact of a strong state machinery since 1945 in providing citizens a range of services and benefits, but the key factor has been that MPs have been successful in meeting constituents' needs (Norton and Wood 1990, Norton 1995). Promotion of this service has been by word of mouth by constituents and has not been driven, generally, by MPs deliberately promoting this service. Fifth, political pressures. Since the 1960s, Liberal Party ⁽³⁾ candidates and MPs have used community politics as a means of getting elected (Marsh 1985). The steady increase of Liberal MPs has introduced a sub-set of MPs particularly sensitive to constituency work. More recently, the Labour Party introduced 'constituency weeks' ⁽⁴⁾, in part, as a way of dealing with potentially rebellious backbenchers (Power 1998b), although there is some evidence that the Party Whips have come to regret this decision (Cowley 2005). In addition, there has been a widespread move towards local parties expecting an MP to cultivate the local constituency (Norton 1995). Sixth, certain MPs are more likely than others to be interested in casework. Norris (1997) found that because of the higher number of housing and social security issues, inner city MPs were slightly more likely to focus on the constituency role. Norton and Wood (1990) suggest that new MPs believe that constituency work gives them a sense of doing something worthwhile. None of these six explanations for the growth in the constituency role, however, includes any consideration of the impact of new communication technologies.

One area of debate concerning the growth of the constituency role is whether MPs are motivated by electoral incentives. The orthodox view is that party alignment of MPs dominates voting behaviour, so there is little room for a personal vote (Curtice and Steed 1992a). Norris (1997) points out that MPs in safe seats are just as likely to be diligent constituency MPs, as those in marginal seats. Challenging this orthodoxy, a body of opinion has suggested that a personal vote exists (Cain *et al.* 1987, Norton and Wood 1990, Denver and Hands 1998, Denver *et al.* 2002, Lilleker 2006). This suggests that MPs can use constituency service as a marketing tool to gradually cultivate voters (Butler and Collins 2001). Certainly several studies have found that MPs themselves believe that constituency casework had an impact on their vote (Barker and Rush 1970, Cain and Ritchie 1982, Buck and Cain 1990). By the 1980s, Cain *et al.* (1987) had identified a small but growing personal vote, especially in the Celtic Fringe and among SDP-Liberal Alliance MPs. Indeed, they suggested that the sole motivation for MPs' constituency work is to win votes. During an election campaign, local campaigning helps challengers (Pattie and Johnston 2003), but incumbents benefit from a permanent campaign between elections (Butler and Collins 2001)

whereby they have access to a range of local opportunities to raise their profile. The electoral impact of constituency service may be more complex than merely winning votes. Rush (2004) argues that MPs ignore constituency service at their peril. This suggests that avoiding constituency service may be more of a vote loser, rather than a vote winner. Norton (2004) explains this by suggesting that constituency service bolsters existing support rather than converting floating voters.

A consensus exists that irrespective of the motive(s) behind the growth of the constituency role, it plays a key role in enhancing representative democracy. The political system appears to benefit from the fact that MPs are the link between individual citizens and the state (Marsh 1985, Norton 1994). For individual citizens, MPs provide a safety valve (Marsh 1985, Norton 1994), and for the government they legitimise consent and identify those aspects of policy which are unacceptable (Birch 1977, Marsh 1985). The MP is a conduit between governed and government. Thus whilst there might be a range of psychological, personal and electoral reasons why MPs focus on constituency service, the cumulative result is a strengthening of the representative system.

3.3.3 How MPs communicate

Communication is at the heart of constituency service. For the welfare role, constituents generally initiate communication, usually through a letter or at a meeting. The MP may (or may not) promote details of how constituents can contact them; for example, the dates and venues of local surgeries. However, on the whole, the MP takes a fairly passive role in that they do not necessarily overtly encourage a bulging constituency mailbag of individual grievances. Moreover, the communication between an MP and a constituent remains private, and the convention is that it should not be used by the MP for political purposes. If there is any campaigning benefit for an MP, it is restricted to the word of mouth of a satisfied constituent who is pleased by the help provided by their MP.

As the local promoter, the MP takes a different view of communication. The MP seeks, where possible, to control (or at least influence) what is being said on a local issue. Rather than limiting their comments to the immediate audience, for example, those who attend a local fete or a meeting of workers being made unemployed, they want to get their message across to all constituents within the constituency. MPs do not just want to be doing good, they want to be seen by as many constituents as possible to be doing good (Jackson and Lilleker 2004). As a result, MPs are now more likely to promote their activities as part of

their constituency work (Negrine and Lilleker 2003). The effectiveness of an MP in doing their job at a constituency level is, in part, reliant upon whether they are perceived to be active servants of their constituents. MPs use a variety of direct and indirect communication channels to enhance their image as the local promoter, including attending meetings, sending out press releases and producing newsletters.

Searing's model suggests that for the welfare role, communication by the MP is passive, and that for the local promoter it is active. This divide applies equally to Norton's model. The 'safety valve' and 'information' provider' are passive communication functions with the MP merely receiving and responding to personal communication. The 'advocate' and 'local dignitary' functions of the promoter role are active, as the MP seeks to reach and persuade their key target audiences. At the very least an MP will want their constituents to know what they are doing on their behalf. Whatever the exact composition of the constituency role is, MPs will use different communication strategies, and this may encourage a move towards e-representation.

3.3.4 MPs and the exchange of information

In the pre-modern era, up to the 1950s, face-to-face contact, particularly public meetings, was the major means by which MPs communicated with constituents (Norris *et al.* 1999, Norris 2000). Television transformed this situation, so that from the late 1950s/60s onwards political debate was essentially a mediated process (Swanson and Mancini 1996). During the modern campaigning era, the primacy of television marginalised MPs in four key ways. First, control of political messages was gradually centralised in the party elite's hands that selected proven media performers to represent it with the media (Denver and Hands 1998). Second, from the 1980s, politicians became increasingly reliant on marketing tools such as market research, polling and advertising beyond the financial reach of MPs (Kavanagh 1995). Third, constituents received most of their political information from the mass media (Norris 2000). Fourth, parliamentary coverage by newspapers was reduced in size. MPs were gradually marginalised in the communication process.

Due to psephological and technological developments this steady decline of MPs' influence on political messages is currently being reversed. In the post-modern era (Norris 2000), some MPs started to carve a campaigning niche for themselves. From the late 1950s through to the early 1990s the orthodox view, as exemplified by the Nuffield election studies (Butler and Rose 1960, Butler and Kavanagh 1974), suggested that local campaigning had little, if any, impact on elections. However, since the 1980s there has been a growing body of work

that suggests that the local campaign does have an electoral impact (Denver and Hands 1992, Pattie *et al.* 1994, Denver and Hands 1997, Denver *et al.* 2002, Franklin and Richardson 2002, Denver *et al.* 2004, Lilleker 2006). The local campaign, by mobilising supporters to vote on election day, complements the national campaign. Denver and Hands (1997) suggest that two developments have driven the growth of local campaigning. First, class de-alignment since the 1960s has increased the number of undecided floating voters. Second, the introduction of the Personal Computer (PC) and DeskTopPublishing (DTP) software has enabled MPs to produce professional-looking campaign materials at an affordable price. The Internet has potentially further enhanced an MP's ability to use technology to communicate directly with voters.

Given the growing importance of local campaigning, many MPs have turned to media relations as the prime means of communicating with constituents. However, individual MPs have found it difficult to secure coverage from the national press (Morgan 1999, Negrine 1999). As a result, over the past thirty years MPs have turned to their local media to shore up their existing support (Negrine and Lilleker 2003). MPs will, therefore, seek to develop newsworthy stories for free weekly newspapers, paid-for daily and weekly newspapers, local radio and regional television. The source of such stories can be any of an MP's five roles, not just the constituency function.

Although MPs have always had relations with their local media, Negrine and Lilleker (2003) suggest that two recent factors are encouraging greater use of this medium. First, like Denver and Hands (1997) they suggest that class de-alignment has led to a reduction in the core vote so MPs have to appeal to the whole community, not just their own supporters. If, as Norton (2004) suggests, constituency service merely motivates existing supporters, MPs have to consider other ways of reaching the undecided voter. Second, with significant increases in spending allowances MPs have more money available to pay staff to help raise their local profile, and so develop a more professional approach. At the same time as the need to reach more constituents more frequently has increased, so the tools to help MPs achieve this have become available.

However, not all MPs have endorsed an active media relations strategy. Franklin and Richardson (2002) suggest that MPs are either traditionalists who tend to dismiss the impact of their local press, or modernists who actively seek contact with local journalists. Negrine and Lilleker (2003) take a different view in classifying the attitude of MPs towards their local

media. They divide MPs into those with a proactive media relations strategy, and those who have a reactive strategy. MPs with a proactive strategy actively seek media coverage through news management. Those MPs who are reactive believe that they are a strong enough story in their own right to attract coverage, or that such activities are of marginal importance. Although Franklin and Richardson (2002), and Negrine and Lilleker (2003) differ on how they classify MPs' media relations activity, they are in agreement that more MPs are using media relations. However, the art of effectively communicating a message is more than just media relations.

As direct communication has become more important to national level political communication, a similar trend is to be found at the local level as well. In the past twenty years MPs have developed their direct marketing activity (Franklin and Richardson 2002). For example, an increasing number of MPs have provided printed newsletters and annual reports. Jackson and Lilleker (2004) suggest that MPs are media agents in that they employ all available mediated and unmediated communications. As well as being active locally, MPs use all available means of letting constituents know how hard they work on their behalf. So far MPs have stressed the importance of local media relations, but the Internet opens up a new communication route to constituents.

3.4 MPs and the Internet

3.4.1 How many MPs are online?

MPs were slower to adopt the Web as a communication tool than political parties. Initially, only a few early adopters set up a website, but eventually a 'bandwagon effect' encouraged more and more MPs to create a personal website (Ward and Gibson 1998). The 1997 general election was viewed as potentially the world's first Internet election (Ward and Gibson 1998), yet only 7% of MPs provided a website (Perrone 2002). If the 1997 election did not stimulate interest among MPs in creating a website, nor did the 2001 election spur the building of more websites. In 1999, 15% of MPs had a website (White 1999), which had increased to only 16% the following year (IEA 2001). Indeed, only 25% of candidates in English constituencies appeared to provide their own website in the 2001 election campaign (Ward and Gibson 2003) ⁽⁵⁾. The well-signposted likely date of the General Election of that year led to an increase, so that by April 2001 a survey by Politicos Bookshop found that the number had crept up to 22% (Waugh 2001). This suggests that at least a third of MP websites were a response to the pending election campaign. This analysis is supported when, exactly a year later, April 2002, the number of accessible websites had risen to 28% (Jackson

2003), of which nearly a third were considered dormant six months after the election. This might logically suggest, therefore, that the increase would slow up, or even decline. Yet, by May 2003, the number had nearly doubled to 50%, and a year later it had increased to 71% of MPs (Ward and Lusoli 2005). If a general election did not act as a significant spur to personal websites, why is there now almost a scramble to get online? The answer is that the majority of MPs now accept that a website is a 'must-have' communication tool (Ward and Lusoli 2005). In order not to be left behind, more MPs are hopping on to the bandwagon, probably without knowing the destination of the vehicle.

Although MPs have had access to email in their offices since 1995 (House of Commons Information Office correspondence 2004), they have been slower to use this aspect of the Internet. An indication of an MP's commitment to email is whether they make their email address publicly known on www.parliament.uk. Publicising an email address is an open invitation to receive email from constituents and others. In 1996, White identified 8% of MPs with email (White 1996). The general election of June 2001 acted as a catalyst with the number rising to 28% (Gardner 2001). By March 2002 this number had risen to 55%, and by June 2002 the number reached 62% (Jackson 2005). This suggests that, as with websites, a 'head of steam' was created which MPs found difficult to resist. Like using a telephone, constituents expect MPs to have an Internet presence.

3.4.2 Why MPs go online?

The existing research suggests that particular types of MPs are more likely to provide a website, and four particular motivating factors can be identified. First, some MPs feel the pressure to appear modern (Perrone 2002), a very reactive reason. Second, MPs in marginal seats are more likely to provide a website (Jackson 2003, Ward and Gibson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). This implies that some MPs believe that a website may help them win elections. Third, there is strong evidence that party plays a role. A consensus exists that Liberal Democrat MPs are the most likely to provide a website (Walker 2000, IEA 2000, Halstead 2000, Jackson 2003, Coleman and Spiller 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). Fourth, there is a suggestion that when MPs are elected may have an impact, with those recently elected more likely to provide a website (Jackson 2003, Coleman and Spiller 2003). However, all of this research has been primarily based on content analysis of MPs' websites, with limited feedback directly from individual MPs.

The situation regarding email is slightly different. Three possible barriers are put forward by MPs to justify why their email addresses are not publicly available. First, it might open the

floodgates of communication from organised pressure groups. Certainly, the House of Commons Information Committee commented “*The ease with which constituents and others can send email is seen by Members as both an opportunity...and as a threat, in that it could generate a demand that Members cannot meet with existing structures and resources.*” (HC Information Committee July 2002: 18). However, research conducted in 2002 found that only 12% of MPs felt that they were not coping with inbound email from constituents (Jackson 2005). Second, some MPs argue that email is not relevant to constituencies of lower socio-economic background (Campbell *et al.* 1999). Third, email does not add anything which the postbag and face-to-face surgeries do not already offer constituents. MPs appear to view email as a different communication channel from a website.

The reason why increasing numbers of MPs make their email address publicly available appears to be different from why they provide a website. Although the Hansard Society encouraged MPs to use email as a communication tool (Steinberg 2001), a survey with 100 respondents conducted in 2002 (Jackson 2005) found that the use of email is being primarily driven by constituents. In this way, the momentum driving an increase in the use of email is the result not of what other MPs do, but the behaviour of constituents. MPs have not willingly jumped on to an email bandwagon.

3.4.3 How MPs use the Internet

There is a consensus among commentators that the quality of MPs websites is poor (IEA 2001, Perrone 2001, Jackson 2001, Castells 2002, Jackson 2003). There are three explanations for this. First, MPs use their websites as primarily one-way electronic brochures (Painter and Wardle 2001, Jackson 2003): a means of promoting their activities and opinions to the electorate. Stanyer (2004) suggests that the Web provides MPs with an opportunity to promote themselves. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it ignores the fact that the web is a user-led technology, and should not just be a one-way communication channel. Second, only a minority of MP’s websites are frequently updated (Steinberg 2001, Jackson 2003). This suggests that MPs feel that they have to have a website, but are not yet convinced that it is worth using finite staff resources to keep it up to date. Third, as a tool of information provision, there is limited interactivity between the MP and the visitor to their website (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). The absence of feedback mechanisms suggests that it will only be a happy coincidence if an MP’s website meets the needs of constituents.

There is limited evidence on the effect of MPs' Internet presence on elections. Prior to the 2001 general election, Moran (2001) predicted that MPs would lose seats because they did not adopt this new technology. Sir George Young suggested that an effective online presence might be worth 5% of the vote (Wearden 2001). A survey of MPs conducted by Halstead (2002) found that 67% viewed their website as a campaign tool. However, Ward and Gibson (2003) found that candidate use of the Internet had little effect on winning votes. It is probably because there is no clear evidence that the Internet can win votes, that MPs consider it a secondary communication and campaigning tool.

MPs have limited literature to help guide their use of email. Steinberg (2001) advised MPs that email was a more effective communication tool than the Web. However, Jackson (2005) found that MPs were not using email as a proactive communications tool. Less than one in ten MPs were using their email as an outbound communication tool. For example, the fact that only 4% of respondents had an e-newsletter suggests that MPs had not yet grasped the campaigning opportunities of email. This was because the growth in the use of email was primarily based on inbound demand from constituents and pressure groups. Whilst email is clearly assisting the constituency role, it not yet widely used to enhance an MP's re-election prospects.

3.4.4 What constituents want from MPs' Internet presence?

Existing research suggests that general online users are mostly interested in using the Internet to gain information and entertainment (James *et al.* 1995, Ferguson and Purse 2000, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Luo 2002). There is, however, limited research on what constituents want from their MPs' websites, but the existing evidence suggests that a communication gap may exist between what MPs provide and what visitors to a website want. Coleman (2001d) found that constituents want a dialogue with their MP, and the opportunity to provide their own opinion. However, the research so far suggests that MPs largely view their website as a one-way communication tool enabling them to let constituents know what they are doing on their behalf.

More recent data suggests that there has been a gradual progression in people's views of what they want from an MPs website (Ward *et al.* 2005). The NOP conducted survey carried out for Ward *et al.* (2005), in December 2004, found that there was a slight increase (from very low baselines) in the number of respondents who want online surgeries and email updates from MPs. However, they also found that interaction between MPs and constituents

was slightly less popular than in 2001. The nature of what constituents want from their MP's website may be changing slightly towards more information provision. Perhaps the most significant finding of this survey puts the whole debate within a context, namely that Ward *et al.* (2005) identify only 8.5% of their sample who are enthusiasts about their MP's website. When considering an MP's online political communication, we are looking at how they communicate with a very small and specific group of citizens. The research, thus far, has been primarily through snapshot opinion polls conducted by reputable companies. This study seeks to further illuminate the perception of MPs' online presence by asking actual users of specific named MP's what they think of that online presence.

Existing research has primarily centred on political actors' perspectives of their Internet presence. Some commentators have questioned the impact of online political communication by focusing instead on the users. For example, Maarek and Wolfsfeld (2003 pp6-7) question the effect of the Internet by asking "*Who is using the new communication technology, in what ways, within what social and political context and with what effects?*" It is precisely such questions which this thesis seeks, in part, to answer in order to develop a sense of balance between what the senders and users of online political messages think of them, and if there is motivation on either side for e-representation.

3.4.5 The impact of the Internet on MPs

By the time of the 2005 General Election, some MPs had provided a website for eleven years, and others had used email for ten. Yet what impact has the Internet had on MPs? The circumstantial evidence, of a slow adoption rate of the new technology, suggests that MPs themselves are not convinced of the value of the Internet. They do not appear to consider the Internet a major vote winner or offering them other significant benefits. Indeed, European-wide research by COST A14 suggests that there is an absence of data on whether the Internet has positive electoral benefits, and, what exactly constituents want from their online representatives (Hoff *et al.* 2004). Primarily, the Internet is considered a secondary communication channel which helps reinforce messages made elsewhere. It does, however, provide some practical benefits, particularly in regard to improving operational efficiency (Gibson *et al.* 2004). However, performance improvements alone do not suggest that the Internet plays a major role for elected representatives.

There is one area of research, namely the impact on the representative role, where the Internet may have a long-lasting impact. Considering the use of ICTs by MPs in seven European countries, Hoff concluded that there may be the 'contours' of a new role as

‘information agents’ (Hoff 2004). Focusing on the UK, Jackson (2003) suggested that websites might be enhancing existing functions such as the constituency and partisan roles. Ward and Lusoli (2005) concluded that websites were helping to modernise the representative process. Although the authors of these three projects were not explicit, their research raises the question of whether their findings can be viewed as an enhancement of MPs existing roles, or whether they herald the creation of a new model of representation.

3.4.6 Weblogs – the future?

Although weblogs have existed since the mid-1990s (Blood 2000b), in the political sphere they only received attention following the innovative use Howard Dean made of his weblog during the US Presidential Primary campaign in 2003. This led Crabtree and Davies (2003) to suggest that by 2010 most politicians will have one. However, the first UK MP’s weblog was only created in March 2003 by Tom Watson (Labour), which led to considerable media attention. Watson has justified his weblog not as a campaigning tool, rather as a means of making him more accountable because he had to “*Justify changing my mind*” (Ferguson and Howell 2004). However, by the time the 2001 Parliament was prorogued only six other MPs had followed suit and created their own weblog ⁽⁷⁾. A technique which usually involves regular, and possibly daily, updating is likely to deter many MPs because of the commitment and resources required. Moreover, the very informal style of a weblog may provide ammunition for opponents. Indeed, King suggests that a comment on the weblog of the Liberal Democrat candidate may have lost her the 2004 Hartlepool by-election (King 2004).

The first research which looked at the use of UK weblogs was conducted by the Hansard Society (Ferguson and Howell 2004). This found that the best weblogs targeted local or niche audiences. Although the Hansard Society’s research project only looked at one MP’s weblog (Tom Watson) they concluded that this communication tool “*Opens up fantastic potential for MPs interested in improving the quality of consultation with constituents*” (Ferguson and Howell 2004 p22). In other words, opening up greater two-way communication, and hence potentially developing the level of conversation required for Coleman’s model of direct representation (Coleman 2005). However, this optimistic view must be tempered by the limitations of the methodology used by the Hansard Society. A jury of interested people was used to assess eight weblogs, but none of these jurors had a previous link with the bloggers. To understand the impact of MPs weblogs, we need to consider the views of weblog visitors.

One study has provided exploratory data of weblogs provided by elected representatives (Auty 2005). Assessing the blogs of seven MPs and one AM, Auty found that the bloggers were regular posters, each with slightly different styles and ways of using their blog. She found that the blogs do encourage feedback, but that not all posts led to a response, and she is uncertain whether these blogs are enhancing a real dialogue. As an exploratory research piece, Auty identifies useful information on the number of postings and what happens to them. However, Auty assumes that those who offer their comments are in fact constituents, yet this may not be the case. Rather, a weblog may be opening up a new virtual constituency for MPs.

3.5 Summary

The concept, and practice, of representation provides the context within which an individual MP operates. The MP is a conduit between the governed and the government, though the exact nature of their job description changes over time as a result of social, economic and political factors. Some roles are growing and others are in decline. At present, the dominance of the constituency role is viewed by some commentators as potentially threatening the ability of some MPs to carry out other roles such as executive scrutiny. For others, the constituency role provides an MP with a distinct *raison d'être* within the early twenty first century Parliament. The practical impact of new technology on MPs, so far, is unclear, but conceptually we need to assess whether it is enhancing existing roles, or whether it is changing the nature of representation.

At present, MPs tend to rely on two mechanisms to communicate with constituents, one-to-one (be it face-to-face or by letter) and via the local media. MPs spend a lot of their time on personal contact through letters and meetings with constituents, officials, colleagues and Ministers. Such communication is rarely designed to bring to public attention an MPs activities and views. In terms of informing the wider public how they work on their behalf, MPs will use a number of direct and indirect communication channels, but local media relations appear to be the most important. The Internet can, potentially, help MPs in both their one-to-one communication, and with reaching the wider public.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) There are a number of slight variations of this quote, this version is that translated and introduced by Maurice Cranston in Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1978) *The Social Contract* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- (2) Although commentators refer to the Internet as a virtual world, the term virtual representation is not used here. As a concept virtual representation was used in the

eighteenth century as a means of defending a small franchise. The argument was that although some interest might not directly elect their own representatives, existing MPs would take into account their interests. See Birch 1971 and Kingdom 1999 for a further discussion of this concept.

- (3) This could happen in one of two ways. First, the MP could be deselected as the party candidate by their own party members. Second, and much more common, is that at the election constituents decide to either abstain or vote for another candidate.
- (4) Since the 1960s the third party has gone through a number of name changes: Liberal Party, Liberal-SDP Alliance and Liberal Democrats.
- (5) As Power (1998b) explains with the large majority it received at the 1997 General Election, the Labour Government's Whips did not need all of its MPs in order to win votes. The Whips were concerned that some backbench Labour MPs, with extra time on their hands, might become rebellious or at least unhelpful. By encouraging 'excess' MPs to stay in their constituencies the Labour Party Whips hoped that this would reduce their problems in Westminster. In addition, they also hoped that 'constituency weeks' would help MPs who were not necessarily expected to have won their seat at the 1997 General Election defend their seats at the next election by building up their local base.
- (6) MPs are not allowed to campaign using their Parliamentary offices. This means, in effect, that if an MP's website is paid for out of their expenses, it should be archived for the duration of an election campaign. Therefore, for an election campaign many MPs need to create a separate campaigning website.
- (7) The other MPs are Austin Mitchell, Richard Allan, Sandra Gidley, Boris Johnson, Shaun Woodward, Clive Soley. Mitchell, Gidley, Johnson and Woodward all sought re-election in 2005 and were successful. Allan and Soley did not seek re-election, but both maintained their weblog after the election. In January 2007 this number had increased to 39, according to Ward & Francoli (2007) though this research notes that three of the seven above no longer provide a weblog.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Weaknesses of the Existing Literature

The existing literature on the use of the Internet by MPs offers a partial picture of the impact of ICT on campaigning, representation and the communication process. We can chart the history of the use of the World Wide Web by MPs (Coleman 1999, Campbell *et al.* 1999), and the motivations for why some MPs provide a website (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Gibson *et al.* 2004, Stanyer 2004, Ward and Lusoli 2005), but there has been very little consideration of what effect the Web has had on MPs, and equally little of weblogs (Ferguson and Howell 2004, Auty 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006). In addition, there is limited research on how MPs use email (Jackson 2005, Jackson 2006a). This narrow understanding of MPs' online political communication is not necessarily solely due to the limited number of research projects, although these have significantly grown in recent years⁽¹⁾. Rather, the constrained range and depth of knowledge is primarily a factor of four methodological weaknesses which this project seeks to address.

4.1.1 *The focus on websites*

Since MPs began to use the Internet, the focus of both academic and other commentators has been primarily on their Websites and therefore how they use the Internet as essentially an information channel (Coleman 1999, Jackson 2003, Gibson *et al.* 2004, Ward and Lusoli 2005). Yet, evidence elsewhere in the political arena suggests that websites are not necessarily the most effective political communication tool (Carter 1999, Casey 2001, Jackson 2005, Jackson 2006b). Email as a social communication channel helps to build relationships (Joinson 2003) and is thus arguably the most efficient, effective and important element of the Internet.

4.1.2 *The emphasis on single channels*

Not all research has focused solely on MPs' websites, but other channels have been viewed separately. There has indeed been research carried out on email (Jackson 2005), e-newsletters (Jackson 2004, 2006a) and weblogs (Ferguson and Howell 2004, Auty and Cowen 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006). However, this research has focused on either MPs use of a website, email or weblogs individually, rather than considering these three communication channels collectively as part of an overall online communications strategy.

Moreover, these online communication channels have not been considered as part of a wider integrated communication strategy linking offline and online communication.

4.1.3 Ignoring individual constituents

Research has not yet addressed what individual constituents think of their MPs' online presence. Rather, the focus has been on either what MPs themselves want (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Stanyer 2004, Ward and Lusoli 2005), or what an amorphous 'general public' think of MPs' online presence (Crabtree 2001, Coleman 2001d, Gibson *et al.* 2002, Ferguson and Howell 2004, Ward *et al.* 2005). Constituents who access their MP's website or e-newsletter have not been asked what they think of their representative's online presence. Therefore, we do not know whether MPs are meeting their online constituents' needs, nor how effective an MP's online presence is in informing, persuading and mobilising.

4.1.4 Over-reliance on content analysis

Content analysis is by far the most widely used tool by researchers for judging an MP's website (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). It is easy to employ, but alone it provides a restricted insight. Content analysis cannot fully answer why an MP has adopted a particular online communication tool, or judge the impact. As well as using content analysis, we also need to triangulate data by asking MPs themselves through both questionnaires and interviews. However, generating data from MPs themselves is insufficient, the data also needs to be triangulated against the views of the users of an MP's online presence.

More specifically in regard to this subject matter, content analysis around the world has tended to focus on politicians' websites (Sadow and James 1999, Reavy 1999, Auty and Cowen 2000, Bowers-Brown and Gunter 2002, Yannes and Lappas 2003, Cornfield and Rainie 2003). There is limited content analysis of the use of email (Carter 1999, Alperin and Schultz 2003, Jackson 2004), and only two content analyses of MPs' weblogs (Auty 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006) ⁽²⁾.

4.2 Aim and Objectives

This research project seeks to examine how, to what extent and why the Internet has influenced MPs; representative role; means of interacting with constituents; and campaigning capabilities.

This aim will be assessed through five objectives:

- 1) To assess the impact of the Internet on the workload of individual MPs;
- 2) To assess the impact of the Internet on the role of individual MPs;
- 3) To assess the impact of the Internet on how MPs communicate with constituents;
- 4) To assess whether MPs are providing online what constituents want;
- 5) To assess the impact of the Internet on individual MPs' re-election prospects.

4.3 Research Methods

4.3.1 Content analysis

Content analysis has limitations in that the researcher is reliant on the document (or website/e-newsletter) in front of them, so that the 'real' story may remain hidden (MacDonald and Tipton 1996, Denscombe 2004, Punch 2005). However, it remains a good starting point. Content analysis is the objective and systematic study of documents and textual sites (Bryman 2001), such as newsletters, leaflets and websites. Key to the success of content analysis is the correct coding (Bryman 2001, Daymon and Holloway 2002), and a number of pilot studies were conducted to check that coding sheets for each model were appropriate (see below). Content analysis can be either quantitative or qualitative: indeed the same document could be used for both (Corbetta 2003). Each content analysis conducted was primarily quantitative in that it primarily sought to produce statistical data (Bryman 2001, Corbetta 2003) from the websites/e-newsletters and weblogs. However, occasionally qualitative material in the form of quotes taken directly from an MP's online presence was also used, when it added to the analysis.

Common to website content analysis is the focus on features and structures (Perry and Bodkin 2000, Lee 2003). For example, Gibson and Ward's (2000) methodology for studying the function and effectiveness of party and candidate websites, was heavily based on word counts. Where Gibson and Ward measured the word count of the candidate's biography and policies, the approach of this research, like that of Williams *et al.* (2002), is based primarily on simple 'yes/no' assessments, for example, is a particular feature present? For e-newsletters, the assessment also considers how frequently a category appears.

In order to assess objectives 2 and 3, the content analysis of websites, e-newsletters and weblogs sought to explore three models: an integrated communication model; MPs' representative role; Best Practice model. Rather than merely assessing the features of an

MP's online presence, the research seeks to identify what impact an online presence has on an MP. The integrated communication model seeks to assess whether MPs merely use each online channel as a separate and tactical tool, or as part of a wider strategy incorporating a range of communication channels. By looking at the MP's role, this research seeks to assess how an MP's online presence is enhancing their representative role, and therefore, whether the concept of e-representation has relevance. The Best Practice model suggests that a standard exists for how MPs should use their Internet presence in order to maximise its use, from both themselves and constituents. Collectively, these three models seek to assess the impact of the Internet on the attitudes and behaviour of individual MPs.

4.3.2 An integrated communication model

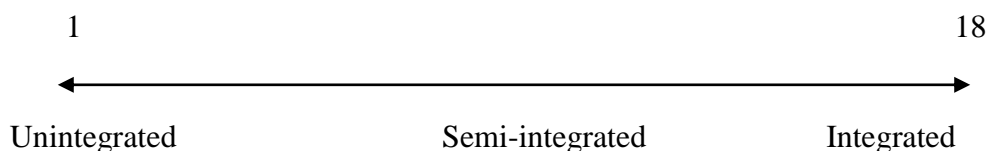
The model outlined in table 4.1 examines whether an MP's website, e-newsletter or weblog is part of a coherent and integrated communication strategy. The Internet has a unique feature which potentially allows an MP to promote messages by that medium, but also at the same time to promote messages communicated through other mediums. For example, does the website promote and link to a range of other communication channels which the MP uses, such as their press releases? The research did not have access to all of an MP's communication, rather the focus was merely on what they chose to put onto the Internet. Therefore, the model was able to give an indication of how MPs integrated other communication channels and messages within their Internet presence.

A simple linear scale (figure 4.1) assesses whether an MP's website/e-newsletter/ weblog is part of a fully integrated communication strategy, unintegrated or semi-integrated. Seventeen features were assessed and their position on the linear scale was determined by the number of features the website/e-newsletter/ weblog met. An integrated approach was considered to require at least eight or more features; an unintegrated approach was assessed as three or less; and those with between four to seven features were considered semi-integrated. The analysis enabled the researcher to assess both the level of each MP's integration, and which channels MPs used the Internet to reinforce their messages.

Table 4.1 Online Integrated Communications Model (website)*

| Feature | Measure |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| Contact details | Yes/No |
| Email contact form provided | Yes/No |
| Surgery details | Yes/No |
| Promotes media coverage secured | Yes/No |
| Promotes public meetings | Yes/No |
| Promotes speeches given | Yes/No |
| Press releases | Yes/No |
| Events calendar | Yes/No |
| Printed newsletters | Yes/No |
| Leaflets/posters | Yes/No |
| Promotes campaigns | Yes/No |
| Subscribe to e-newsletter | Yes/No |
| SMS text messaging | Yes/No |
| Weblog | Yes/No |
| Promotes local membership | Yes/No |
| Asks for volunteers | Yes/No |
| Fundraising | Yes/No |

* The online integrated communication model for e-newsletters substitutes ‘provides a website’ for ‘subscribe to e-newsletter’, and that of weblogs has both ‘promotes a website’ and ‘subscribe to e-newsletter’.

Figure 4.1 Online Integrated Communications Scale

4.3.3 An MPs' representative role

The *second* content analysis-based model (table 4.2) assesses an MP's role as a representative. Searing (1994) identified five possible roles that MPs fulfilled, only four of which were considered for this research project, as it is unlikely whether content analysis of websites, e-newsletters and weblogs (or even interviews or questionnaires) can assess the ministerial aspirant role. 'Promotes specialism' considers whether an MP mentions areas and issues of particular interest, and what they are doing to further them. For example, this might include particular campaigns they are involved in, or the specialist parliamentary or non-parliamentary committees they sit on. 'Executive scrutiny' focuses on whether an MP is communicating to constituents their scrutinising role whereby they question and examine

what a Government is doing on behalf of citizens. Primarily this communication will be one-way, explaining the campaigns and activities they have conducted on behalf of constituents and causes. For example, Parliamentary Questions the MP has tabled, or Early Day Motions they have supported. The ‘partisan role’ is both general and specific. The MP’s Internet presence can be used to promote their party’s national policies and activities, but they can also encourage specific named assistance for the local party. The use of content or style provided by the MP’s party headquarters might indicate to what extent the party elite is trying to shape an individual MP’s online presence. When an MP reports back on issues where they have put forward the case for all or part of the constituency, they are fulfilling the ‘constituency role’. A significant proportion of this constituency role can be non-political, for example, providing information on local activities and news in the community. This model, therefore, combines both how a MP uses the Internet to communicate, with the nature of the messages they convey.

Table 4.2 MPs’ Representative Role

| Feature | Measure |
|--|--|
| 1) Promotes specialism Mentions areas of personal interest/expertise Mentions parliamentary activity in this specialist area | Yes/No Yes/No |
| 2) Executive scrutiny Promotes their parliamentary scrutinising activity | Yes/No |
| 3) Partisan role Promotes party policy Promotes local party activity Promotes national party activity Encourages party membership/support Promotes party election campaigns Uses content provided by national party | Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No |
| 4) Constituency role Refers to individual casework/constituents Speaks for constituency * Seeks views on local issues Seeks views on national issues Provides local information Promotes local community activities** | Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No |

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

** For example, providing information on local non-partisan events and organisations.

4.3.4 Achieving Best Practice

The *third* tranche of content analysis attempts to construct a model of Best Practice. This model is in part influenced by three existing models, two of which focused on e-newsletters, and one on websites. First, Chaffey (2003) identifies twelve decisions which have to be made in offering an Internet presence. Some factors such as the importance of content, format and frequency have been incorporated into my model. However, as Chaffey was considering only commercial online communication, five of the decisions which relate to profit-generation are not relevant to a study of MPs. Second, the Congressional Management Foundation's Online Project (2003) provided ten rules for U.S. legislators to follow in making best use of their online presence. This model's emphasis on content, format, netiquette and how politicians use their e-newsletter proved very helpful. However, the Congressional Management Foundation's rules do not completely apply to MPs. In part, this is because some aspects of the US model do not translate into the UK experience; for example, the emphasis on fundraising. More fundamentally, the Congressional Management Foundation rules do not necessarily address the representative role of an MP, in particular feedback mechanisms. Third, Williams *et al.* (2002) identify the importance of structure to websites, such as brevity and how easy it is for the user to navigate. Elements of all three models above have been incorporated when explaining whether MPs follow best practice.

The Best Practice model (table 4.3) identifies four factors which shape how well an MP is using the Internet. First, the structure ⁽³⁾ of their online presence, which, for websites is based on four criteria indicating whether it is user friendly: the existence of a search engine; the use of enmeshing ⁽⁴⁾; how short it is (brevity); and how 'sticky'. Stickiness (Jackson 2003) refers to whether the website provides features which encourage a visitor to return because they are frequently updated. The structure for e-newsletters was measured slightly differently by concentrating on their style (whether they provide summaries and are short), regularity, and the ability to unsubscribe. Weblogs are very similar to websites, with navigation measured by the existence of a search engine. Second, there is a consensus that content is key to the success of any organisation's online presence (Ollier 1998, Collin 2000, Haig 2001, McManus 2001, Phillips 2001, Chaffee 2003). Ultimately, the provision of information not easily available elsewhere drives traffic to a website, weblog or e-newsletter. The message needs to be topical and relevant to the audience. The model divides the content into local and national to see where MPs are focusing their message. Such content needs to be updated regularly so that it is current and topical. Third, the Internet is a campaigning tool promoting both national and local campaigns. However, campaigning is not just an armchair activity: it

is not enough to simply provide a message; MPs must ask visitors and subscribers to do something with that campaign information. Fourth, the Internet opens up the possibility of enhancing an MP's representative role by encouraging two-way dialogue between elector and elected. Such feedback has been divided into two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984). The former suggests that feedback is collected merely to help an MP better promote their message; whereas symmetrical communication implies that having received feedback from constituents, the MP may modify their message in some way, however small. The level of interactivity of the website, e-newsletter or weblog was based on a subjective scale of high, medium or low.

A scoring system, figure 4.2, was used to assess how well an MP meets each of the four criteria of the Best Practice model. Each category is scored from 1 to 10 (with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest). The total, therefore, is marked out of forty. 'Expert' is considered from a score of 26 and over, 'mediocre' from 15-25, and 'inexpert' is 14 or below. The terms 'expert', 'mediocre' and 'inexpert' indicate to what extent MPs' use of their online presence meets existing advice on how the technology can be most effectively used.

MPs who promoted their publicly available e-newsletter on their website. This had been preceded by two pilot studies designed to help develop validity (Bouma and Atkinson 1995). The first was of party e-newsletters and allowed for testing of the methodology and Best Practice model (Jackson 2004). The second was of the 7 MPs with an e-newsletter from 1st April 2003 until 31st March 2004 which tested the sample, the methodology and the MP's representative and Best Practice models (Jackson 2006a). These two pilot studies led to minor changes in the models ⁽⁶⁾.

A content analysis of seven MPs' weblogs took place from 1st January 2005 until 31st March 2005. This analysis considered not only what the MP said, but also (for the six blogs where this was applicable) the views of visitors to those weblogs. Whilst the number of MPs is very small, and those who view and comment on MPs' weblogs are self-selecting, it does provide an indication of how MPs are using what is still a developing technology. The time period covered, at three months, was greater than any other research of MPs weblogs, with Auty's (2005) covering two one week periods, and Ferguson and Griffiths (2006) covering only one week. Moreover, both of these included non-MPs in their samples. The timeframes for the samples were chosen because it was expected that Parliament would be prorogued in April 2005 to enable the General Election day to be held in May. Indeed, this is what happened and it enables us to identify whether the nature of MPs' e-newsletters changed as we got closer to the 'war-footing' of an election campaign.

4.3.6 Questionnaires

Content analysis suffers from a number of weaknesses, but the most salient for this research is that it can be difficult to ascertain the explanation for 'why' MPs or users formed opinions or made decisions (Bryman 2001). The questionnaires used in this research are both descriptive and explanatory in that they seek to establish the nature of existing conditions and cause and effect relationships (Burns 2000). Moreover, they seek to establish both 'facts' and 'opinions' (Denscombe 2004). Therefore, this research project used four separate questionnaires to help triangulate the content analysis data. Two of the surveys were to MPs and two were to the users of an MP's Internet presence. This approach was designed to get a more balanced view in terms of what MPs wanted to achieve, and also what their constituents thought of what MPs did online.

The first questionnaire was conducted in June/July 2002 and considered the impact of constituency-based email on MPs (Appendix A). This survey was emailed to only the 400

MPs who (at that time) made their email address publicly available via the official Parliament website (www.parliament.uk). Given the nature of the topic, it was appropriate to use the very channel which was the focus of the survey. Moreover, an email survey is easier to administer than a postal survey (Hewson *et al.* 2003). Using fourteen closed questions, the questionnaire addressed email from constituents, how email was used by MPs and the effect of email on the conduct of their representative roles. There was one email reminder a month after the first email was sent out. The return of questionnaires, 100 in total, gave a response rate of 25% ⁽⁷⁾. The data was recorded, and then analysed, using SPSS software.

The second questionnaire was posted to 657 MPs (not the Speaker) ⁽⁸⁾ in May 2003, with an email reminder in early June (Appendix B). This survey sought to identify why MPs provided a personal website, how they used their website, and what effect they assessed their website to have had. The questionnaire, therefore, was designed to complement, and add to, the data collected by existing content analysis of MPs' websites. The questionnaire comprised sixteen closed questions, and also asked a separate set of questions for those MPs who did not have a website to find out why this was the case. In total 161 MPs responded, 134 of which had a personal dedicated website. At the time of the research, 327 MPs were identified as having a personal website that the public could easily access via www.parliament.uk. The total respondents represent 24.3% of the total sample, a reasonable return for MPs, but it is worth looking at the specific rates of the two groups. Of those 327 MPs with websites, the response rate is 40.1%, whereas for those without a website the response rate is 8.3%. MPs are notoriously poor at responding to surveys (Barker and Rush 1970, Weinberg *et al.* 1999, Lilleker 2003, Coleman and Spiller 2003), and therefore, these rates are encouraging. As with the former questionnaire, the data was recorded, and then analysed using SPSS.

The third questionnaire was aimed at visitors to MPs' websites, and to ensure that the sample were indeed users of these online channels, the survey was accessed by a hyperlink from the MP's website (Appendix C). The questionnaire included personal details and fifteen closed questions. A link from the MP's website (using SNAP software) directed respondents to an online survey. The data was then converted to SPSS for analysis. Three MPs websites were chosen, representing one from each of the major parties: Gary Streeter (Conservative); Annette Brooke (Lib Dem); Ian Lucas (Labour). Each of these MPs had been interviewed, the responses to which suggested that Streeter was an Internet novice, Brooke fairly interested and Lucas an early adopter. Due to the practicalities of setting up the surveys,

each MP's survey was published on their website at different time periods. Ian Lucas had the survey on his website from June until November 2006. Gary Streeter had a link to the survey on his website from July until November 2006, and Annette Brooke's website hosted the survey from September 2006 until November 2006. These were the first ever web-hosted surveys from MPs' websites which asked their specific users what they thought of it: as a result, it was an experiment.

The interviews with MPs implied that the number of people visiting their websites was low, and the total number of responses, 100 ⁽⁹⁾, suggests that this was indeed the case. Generalisation from such a small sample is problematic, moreover, it is likely that those who responded do not necessarily fit the profile of all of an MP's constituents precisely because they are probably interested in politics. Assessing the validity of the survey findings must take into account non-response error where too few people from the target sample respond (Filion 1975, Salont and Dillman 1994, Schonlan *et al.* 2002). The existing advice is that to avoid this problem of bias, researchers need to make web-surveys 'respondent friendly' (Dillman *et al.* 1998). However, the problem this experimental survey faced would not necessarily be addressed by improving the design of the survey (Vehovar *et al.* 2001). As shown below, the virtually identical e-newsletter survey led to a significant response rate. The problem appears to be that there may simply not have been enough visitors to MPs' websites, generating a very limited pool of respondents. As a result, these three web-hosted surveys can, at best, only provide a general indication rather than hard conclusions.

The fourth, also a web-hosted survey, was conducted among subscribers to the e-newsletters of three MPs (one from each of the main parties): Nick Palmer (Labour); Steve Webb ⁽¹⁰⁾ (Lib Dem); Peter Atkinson (Conservative) (Appendix D). Palmer and Webb had used an e-newsletter for over four years, whereas Atkinson was a more recent and less frequent user of this communication tool. Each of the e-newsletters was likely to attract constituents who were interested in politics, and hence a more self-selecting sample with probably a different profile to the 'average' constituent within each MP's constituency. Of the three MPs, only Webb kept a closed list available only to constituents, the other two were available to anyone who wished to subscribe. A link to the survey was attached to each MP's e-newsletter. Atkinson sent the link out to e-newsletter subscribers in April 2006, but this generated a single figure response. Webb sent the web-hosted link out to his email list in July 2006 which generated 890 responses. Palmer sent a link to the survey in September 2006 with 227

responses. The findings were made available to each MP, but they did not have access to any individual feedback from respondents.

Running a pilot study or pre-test is usually recommended (Bouma and Atkinson 1995, Ruane 2005), and therefore the method of delivery tested some of the questions and analytical tools with a completely separate sample. Two web-hosted surveys of subscribers to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat publically subscribed e-newsletters used a different sample but very similar questions (Jackson and Lilleker 2007). The two pilots enabled the process and questions to be tested ⁽¹¹⁾.

Using a web-hosted survey makes it easier for the sample to complete (Buckler and Dolowitz 2005), and makes administration and analysis easier for the researcher (Ruane 2005, Buckler and Dolowitz 2005). However, web-hosted surveys have been criticised on the basis that not everyone in a sample has Internet access, or that they can be accessed by those not part of the target sample (Denscombe 2004, Ruane 2005). Therefore, the fact that respondents were self-selecting raised non-sample errors (Filion 1975, Salont and Dillman 1994, Schonlan *et al.* 2002), because they might not be constituents. Existing research on online participation suggests that respondents to both the website and e-newsletter surveys are more likely to be political activists, or at least, interested in politics (Norris 2001, Ward *et al.* 2003, Jackson and Lilleker 2007). The sample is likely to be different in nature from many other constituents, and therefore, any conclusions will not necessarily apply to all constituents, though they may be applicable to the politically interested in other constituencies.

4.3.7 Interviews

Interviews provide rich data by exploring how the interviewees interpret the issue under research (Corbetta 2003, Burns 2000, Punch 2005). However, given the nature of the sample, it is likely that the view expressed in them is likely to be MP-centric. Interviews were used to add to, and triangulate, data collected by content analysis and surveys.

Interviews were conducted only among MPs with an Internet presence (be it website, e-newsletter or weblog), which amounted to less than 500 of the 657 (Ward and Lusoli 2005). Therefore, to interview just under 10% of the sample, forty four interviews were conducted by email, telephone or face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews were used which allowed for greater flexibility (Grix 2004, Punch 2005). Given that all respondents (MPs) had access to the telephone and were used to being interviewed via telephone (Ruane 2005), this approach encouraged time-pressed MPs to respond. Interviews varied in length from twenty minutes

through to two hours. Four email interviews were conducted because the respondents (one a senior Cabinet Minister) did not have the time available for a formal interview. These email interviews, based on the answers to a short range of questions, do not provide the depth and range of data collected in the other interviews, nonetheless they offer some useful material. Email interviews are considered a legitimate approach (Buckler and Dolowitz 2005), which allows for asynchronous communication and hence reflective answers (Daymon and Holloway 2002). All interview transcripts were member checked (Denscombe 2004, Bryman 2004) by the MP who received, commented upon and approved a transcript of the interview which acted as a safeguard on the accuracy of data. It was fairly quickly established that most MPs repeated similar general themes and phrases. Therefore, the later interviews specifically targeted those MPs whose online presence had an unusual or interesting aspect.

The sample was primarily self-selecting and so non-probability sampling was used (Bryman 2001, Aldridge and Levine 2001, Ritchie and Lewis 2003). MPs were selected via a number of different routes/mechanisms. The first, and largest tranche was chosen from MPs who had indicated when returning the website survey that they would be willing to help. The second group were selected as members of the All-Party Parliamentary Backbench Group on the Internet as this suggested an interest in this technology ⁽¹²⁾. A number of well-known Internet campaigners who were not in the previous two categories became the third group to be contacted. Fourth, all seven MPs with a blog and all ten MPs whose e-newsletter was content analysed were contacted, as they represented a very small but important sample. Fifth, a number selected at random. Sixth, a number were identified from the content analysis data collection who had interesting or unusual aspects to their website. Therefore, this self-selecting purposive sample for interview was chosen through a number of different groups. Collectively, they included a very wide range of MPs' views on the Internet from the very lukewarm to the very passionate.

4.4 Data analysis

4.4.1 Personal characteristics

Assessing which MPs have a web presence and how they use the Internet, Ward and Lusoli (2005) used a four part framework of personal; constituency; party; and Parliamentary factors. Personal factors they divided into skills/attitudes, socio-demographic characteristics and seniority. The constituency environment included marginality of seat and technical profile of the constituency. Party environment included the party's culture, resources and

incentives. Parliamentary environment covers the House of Commons' culture and formal resources.

The framework used here is similar, but it focuses on a narrower range of objectives relating to MPs' workload, roles, communication and electoral prospects. Therefore, the focus is slightly different with two different types of characteristic:

- 1) Personal characteristics of the MP (age, cohort, gender)
- 2) Political factors (party, marginality of seat, seniority)

Initially, a range of data was collected for this research which was not subsequently used. This included the nature of the constituency, such as rural or urban, socio-economic classification (based on an interpretation of data provided by Waller and Griddle 2002) and whether rebellious MPs displayed different behaviour. However, it soon became clear that there were a) methodological questions regarding personal interpretations of the criteria, and, b) the nature of the constituency did not appear to have a discernable effect. As a result this research project has focused only on the impact of personal and political characteristics.

Personal characteristics are a common criterion tested by researchers, but so far they have been fairly limited in their application. Primarily, personal characteristics have given some insights into why and how MPs use a website (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005), but there has been limited consideration of whether particular types of MPs are more likely to use e-newsletters (Jackson 2004, 2006a), and none for weblogs. Moreover, there is little research on whether personal characteristics influence the effect of the Internet (Gibson and Ward 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005).

The personal characteristics of MPs were identified using *The Times Guide To The 2001 General Election*. Marginality of seat was based on Finer *et al*'s. (1961) percentage of majority model, where seats were divided into safe (11% of votes over the next highest candidate), near-marginal (5.1% to 10.9%) or marginal (5% or under). Age was assessed simply on the basis of a series of age bands: 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 and over. The cohort was based on the Parliament when an MP was first elected to the House. Given the limited number of MPs elected before 1974, they are gathered together into one cohort. Gender was straightforward and seniority was judged on whether an MP was either a Government Minister or an Official Opposition Frontbencher, determined by consulting the

official list on Parliament's website (www.parliament.uk) at the beginning of each stage of the research ⁽¹³⁾.

4.4.2 Typology of MPs use of the Internet

Identifying characteristics is a common approach to take in this field (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005, Jackson 2005, Jackson 2006b, Ward *et al.* 2007), and can help explain which MPs might adopt a technology first. As noted in 2.3.1 diffusion of innovations is a largely descriptive theory, and is a limited tool for analysing in depth the impact of the Internet on MPs. The development of a typology can help provide greater insight into how and why MPs use the Internet by illustrating social phenomenon (Waddock 1989), and should therefore help create order out of chaos (McKnight & Chervany (2001). Coleman's (1999a) study of technology and Parliament implies that eventually all MPs will adopt a technology in exactly the same way. However, the typology below rejects this uniformity of approach and seeks to explain and categorise the use of the Internet by MPs.

There are a wide number of ways of constructing a typology, with no single model for doing so. The approach taken in the typology of MPs and the Internet (figure 4.3) is influenced by Horrigan (2007) ⁽¹⁴⁾. This research, although aimed at individual citizens, provides the basis of an explanation of online behavior. Two of Horrigan's dimensions looked at individuals' activities online and their attitudes towards the Internet, and these have been adapted for use by MPs. Resource issues have clearly had an impact on the use by MPs of other communications channels, such as media relations (Negrine and Lilleker 2003), and consequently the third dimension of this typology is the resources MPs have available to them to use the Internet. The main difference with Horrigan's typology is that the focus is on the sender of the online message, and the method is primarily interviews with MPs, supplemented by the survey of MPs.

Figure 4.3 Typology of MPs and the Internet

| Dimension | Component | Measurement |
|-------------------|----------------------|--|
| Resources | Skills | Ability of the MP, or their staff, to set-up and manage their Internet presence? |
| | Time allocated | How important is the Internet in terms of allocating their resources? |
| Activities | Control | Do MPs believe they are controlling their Internet presence? |
| | Use | How do MPs use their Internet presence |
| Attitudes | Motive | Do MPs seek to use the Internet as part of a coherent vision or as a reaction to others' activities? |
| | Assessment of impact | What impact do MPs believe that their Internet presence has had? |

Existing political communication theory provides a context to how MPs might view and use the Internet. Political communication is a competitive field, and the permanent campaign suggests that political actors will always look to gain an edge (Ornstein and Mann 2000). As we noted earlier the Internet was heralded by some as offering qualitative change which would fundamentally transform the political process, whilst others believed it would merely lead to enhancements. MPs themselves have not usually been viewed as technological innovators (Coleman 1999a). Indeed, specifically with the Internet, MPs have been accused of jumping on a bandwagon, rather than having a clear strategic reason for an online presence (Perrone 2002). The typology of MPs and the Internet is set against a general sense that, as a society, MPs have not been leading the political adoption of the Internet. Therefore, if MPs are following and not leading society, it is important to gauge why and with what effect.

4.5 Strengths and Limitations of Research Methodology

There have been a number of studies of MPs' online presence. Apart from identifying and addressing weaknesses from previous projects, this study has a number of methodological

strengths. First, it is not reliant on one method or sample, rather eight separate different fieldwork projects were conducted (see table 4.5). Second, with content analysis of websites, e-newsletters, two separate surveys of MPs and interviews, the researcher has, in some form or another used data from 439 MPs out of 658, at 66% of all MPs, a very high proportion. Third, as few MPs provide an e-newsletter or weblog, a high percentage of existing e-newsletters and weblogs have been studied ⁽¹⁵⁾. Fourth, this is the first study of MPs' online presence to actually ask the users of that presence what they think, and therefore is generating new data. Fifth, underpinning the collection of data is the importance of ensuring that it is both reliable and valid in order to reduce subjectivity, and enhance the objectivity of the research. For example, the content analysis generally avoided coding which could be interpreted differently by different researchers. In addition, ten per cent of the 420 websites that were content analysed were re-tested (Bell 1996) a month later to conduct the same test. Table 4.4 is a schema which explains how validity was ensured by indicating the appropriateness of the methods used (Bouma and Atkinson 1995, Bell 1996, Blaxter *et al.* 1996, Denscombe 2004). In particular table 4.4 seeks to stress internal validity (LeCompte and Goetz 1982), of the methods with what the research was seeking to achieve, in that the data collected reinforces each other. External validity (LeCompte and Goetz 1982) in terms of whether it is representative and makes sense is primarily tested against existing literature (Gibson *et al.* 2004, Ward and Lusoli 2005, Auty 2005, Jackson 2006b). Against this existing research, the findings of the MPs interviewed and surveyed, and websites analysed, are consistent. The web-hosted survey of Internet users is breaking new ground, and as they are self-selecting it is likely that they may be more interested in politics than other constituents. However, the answer to the questions of their demographic profile (Appendix G) and political loyalties (Appendix H) suggests that they appear to be a cross-section of the wider population and are not skewed in any particular way that might suggest the data collected is unusual.

Table 4.4 Overview of Research

| Objective | Themes | Method |
|--|--|--|
| Impact of the Internet on workload of MPs. | 1) How MPs manage their website, email, e-newsletter or weblog. 2) Number of inbound emails. 3) The nature of email respondents. 4) The workload caused by Internet presence. | 1) Interviews with MPs. Survey of MPs' use of email and the Web. 2) Interviews with MPs and survey of MPs' use of email. 3) Interviews with MPs. 4) Interviews with MPs and survey of MPs' use of email and the Web. |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Impact of the Internet on the roles of MPs. | 1) Specialism. 2) Scrutiny. 3) Partisan. 4) Constituency role. | 1) Content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblog, and interviews with MPs. 2) Content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblog, and interviews with MPs. 3) Content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblog, and interviews with MPs. 4) Content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblog, and interviews with MPs. |
| Impact of the Internet on how MPs communicate to constituents. | 1) Link between website, email, e-newsletter and weblog and other communications used by an MP. 2) Why have a website, e-newsletter, weblog? 3) How a website, e-newsletter and weblog was used. 4) Why not have an e-newsletter or weblog? | 1) Interviews with MPs and content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblogs. 2) Interviews with MPs. 3) Interviews with MPs, content analysis of MPs' websites, e-newsletters and weblogs, survey of MPs' use of the Web. 4) Interviews with MPs. |
| Assess whether MPs are providing online what constituents want. | 1) Who visits a website or subscribes to an e-newsletter? 2) How do users hear about the website or e-newsletter? 3) Why do they visit a website or subscribe to an e-newsletter? 4) How do they use the information gained by visiting a website or subscribing to an e-newsletter? 5) The impact of visiting a website or subscribing to an e-newsletter (citizen engagement)? | 1) Interviews with MPs and web-hosted survey of users. 2) Web-hosted survey of users. 3) Web-hosted survey of users. 4) Web-hosted survey of users. 5) Web-hosted survey of users. |
| The impact of the Internet on MPs re-election prospects. | 1) Incumbency factor. 2) Permanent campaign. 3) Enhance constituency role. 4) Benefits of websites, e-newsletters and weblogs. 5) Winning votes. | 1) Interviews with MPs. 2) Interviews with MPs and web-hosted surveys 3) Interviews with MPs, content analysis and web-hosted surveys. 4) Interviews with MPs, content analysis, surveys of MPs' use of the Web and web-hosted surveys. 5) Interviews with MPs, content analysis, surveys of MPs' use of the Web and web-hosted surveys. |

Table 4.5 summarises the schedule of fieldwork. The views of MPs, through the two questionnaires to them and interviews, were ascertained first. The researcher then sought to objectively assess these views through content analysis of MPs' Internet presence. Finally, the views of the users of MPs' Internet presence were sought through web-hosted surveys. As a result the data collected reflects a triangulation of the views of MPs, assessment by the researcher and users of their Internet. There was, inevitably a cross-over of data collection, especially the interviews, but frequently these were designed to address the MPs views of specific findings of the other methods.

Table 4.5 Timetable of Research Fieldwork

| Fieldwork | When conducted | Sample size |
|---|---|---|
| Emailed survey of MPs' use of email | June/July 2002 | 100* |
| Postal survey of MPs' use of a website | May 2003 | 161 |
| Interviews with MPs (on their use of a website, e-newsletter or weblog) | 4 th July 2003 to 2 nd May 2006 | 44 |
| Content analysis of MPs' e-newsletters | 1 st April 2004 to 31 st March 2005 | Ten MPs' e-newsletters** |
| Content analysis of MPs' websites | February 2005 (re-test of 40 sites March 2005) | 420 |
| Content analysis of MPs' weblogs | 1 st January to 31 st March 2005 | All seven MPs with a weblog |
| Web-hosted survey of visitors to MPs' websites | June to November 2006 | Visitors to the websites of Annette Brooke, Ian Lucas, Gary Streeter |
| Web-hosted survey of subscribers to MPs' e-newsletters | July 2006 (Steve Webb) September 2006 (Nick Palmer) | Subscribers to the e-newsletters of Steve Webb (890 responses) and Nick Palmer (227 responses). |

* The questionnaire was only sent to the 400 MPs whose email address was publicly available on www.parliament.uk

**Thirty nine MPs at the time claimed to have an e-newsletter, but the researcher received only ten.

In a new and developing area of research there are some limitations to this study. First, with such small numbers of MPs with e-newsletters and weblogs, the conclusions on these two communication channels can, at best, be indicative. It is difficult to generalise some of the conclusions to all MPs. Second, the content analysis was based on only one coder (the researcher) which, although enabling consistency, could lead to biased reporting or to another researcher arriving at different conclusions (Bowdin 2007). However, given that MPs adapted to this new technology at different rates, this researcher has identified a number of new trends in their Internet usage.

Footnotes

- (1) In particular, there have been two ESCR funded projects which have addressed a number of ideas in this field: 1) Democracy & Participation Initiative (2000-2003) 2) Representation in the Internet Age: an Anglo-Australian comparison.
- (2) Though only Auty's research was conducted before the 2005 General Election, and hence contemporary to the timeframe of this research.
- (3) The structure will differ slightly depending on whether we are assessing a website, e-newsletter or weblog.
- (4) Enmeshing is another way of directing the visitor and making it easier for them to navigate by linking pages within your website (Ollier 1998, p133). Enmeshing uses hyperlinks but they are within the website, rather than to other websites.
- (5) The site www.parliament.uk was chosen because it was the official means by which MPs promoted their website after they had registered it with the House of Commons Information Office.
- (6) In both instances the changes were designed to simplify the models, and make data collection easier, by removing some criteria based on subjective concepts, terms or measurements. Therefore, the changes were designed to improve the reliability of the models if they were applied by other researchers.
- (7) This survey was also sent to MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) and AMs, (Members of the Welsh Assembly) but the data is not considered relevant to this project. Members of these devolved assemblies have different histories, constituencies and roles and therefore comparison with Westminster based MPs is problematic.
- (8) The questionnaire was not sent to the Speaker, because the Speaker does not campaign, therefore, any website they provided would not fulfil the same functions as that of other MPs' websites.
- (9) Ian Lucas received 58 responses, Gary Streeter 27 and Annette Brooke 15.
- (10) Note that Steve Webb does not refer to it as an e-newsletter, rather it is an email consultation list, suggesting a slightly different function.
- (11) The lessons learnt from this exercise related mostly to the actual technical delivery of a web-hosted survey.
- (12) This was very disappointing and led to only 3 or 4 interviews, with a number of MPs claiming they were not actually members of the group. In fact, according to the official membership published by the House of Commons they were indeed members, but may have

only joined to help a colleague so that the group would be considered large enough to continue operating.

(13) This means that no Liberal Democrat was considered as a senior MP.

(14) Though note that the content, categorisations and findings are different. What is similar is the use of three dimensions as the tool to identify the categories.

(14) All seven existing weblogs were studied, and content analysis and interviewing was conducted with half of those MPs claiming to have used an e-newsletter.

CHAPTER 5

MPs AND THE WEB

5.1 Introduction

Websites are the part of the Internet with which MPs have been most closely associated. Indeed, any study of the impact of the Internet on MPs must start with a consideration of their websites. Understanding how MPs use their websites to communicate with constituents provides a context in which we can address their use of email, e-newsletters and weblogs.

5.2 The Effect of a Website on an MP's Workload

5.2.1 How MPs manage their website

Before the impact a website has on MPs' workload can be assessed, we need to identify how they actually manage it. Interview respondents note that managing their website has not involved fundamental changes in how their office operates. It would appear that most MPs expect either their existing staff to do the job, or employ a specialist webmaster as a consultant. For example, Robert Newman, researcher for Julie Morgan (Lab) states that *"The updating of the geocities site is part of my weekly work"* (Newman 2005). Robert Key (Cons) has two staff in his constituency office who *"Are capable of making changes to the website."* (Key 2005) Others, such as one London based Labour MP, hires a local party activist on a monthly basis to update his website. Most respondents did not increase their own skills set, but MPs such as Paul Flynn (Lab), (Flynn 2004) Andrew Miller (Lab) (Miller 2005) and Andrew Bennett (Lab) (Bennett 2004) who had a prior interest in IT did play a more active role in managing their website. MPs manage their website in the same way they manage the rest of their communications workload. How MPs manage their website has not necessarily increased their professionalism.

5.2.2 Effect of a website on an MP's workload

There is a divergence of opinion amongst MPs as to whether having a website has a significant impact on their workload. Of those asked, thirteen said it did not increase their workload and eight said it did, and therefore, a slight majority suggested it did not increase their workload. The main difference between respondents was that those who did note that it increased their workload were those who managed it themselves, and/or were Web enthusiasts. At least two interviewees specifically stated that the main 'disadvantage' of having a website was the workload, for example, Candy Atherton (Lab) pointed out that the work tended to come in blocks rather than daily. It was worth noting that of the eight who said it did increase their workload, at least six do not seem to view this as necessarily a

problem. For example, Andrew Miller suggests that it is “*time-consuming*” (Miller 2005) simply because he wants to do it himself, rather than employ a consultant. Four staff members, Graham Leadbetter, James Cook, Andrew May and Matt Rogerson ⁽¹⁾ pointed out that they received more casework through emails via the website. That the website increases workload is seen by some as a positive, not a negative, “*It does add considerably to my workload, but this is not bad thing, as we are getting more constituents contact us.*” (Whitehead 2005) By encouraging more constituents to contact their MP, a website is enhancing that MP’s representative role.

One researcher, Matt Rogerson, hints at a possible qualitative change to MPs’ work patterns. He suggests that “*A lot of our work is reactive, but doing the website is something that is proactive. Therefore, it adds a further pressure, especially when we are reacting to something.*” (Rogerson 2006) This suggests that much of an MP’s office work is reactive in nature to constituents, party and others, but the website offers a means by which they can change the office ethos to a more proactive stance. This is a corollary to the findings of both Franklin and Richardson (2002), and Negrine and Lilleker (2003), regarding the use of media relations, in that a growing number of MPs actively promote themselves, and the Web is the latest channel by which they achieve this. However, the ability of MPs to control the amount of messages they send out via a website, is largely determined by the weight of other messages coming into the office.

Of those interviewees who believed a website had not increased workload, there were four different types of response. First, three interviewees simply noted that it had not led to an increase in work. Second, three MPs pointed out that it had not increased their personal workload, as either their staff or a consultant did the work for them. Third, three interviewees suggested that the website had actually led to time savings or merely utilised work already completed elsewhere. For example, Steve Webb (Lib Dem) points out that “*Probably two-thirds of the material is already written elsewhere, such as press releases.*” (Webb 2004). Four respondents suggest the workload can be easily managed within the daily workload. For example, Paul Flynn (Lab) states that “*The website becomes part of the routine because it is easy to use.*” (Flynn 2004) Three respondents (Derek Wyatt, Andrew Bennett and Martin Linton’s researcher, Judith Attar) suggest it takes only minutes each day/week to update and so is no real extra hardship. Overall, therefore, the existence of a website does not appear to have had either a significantly negative or positive effect on an MP’s workload.

5.3 Impact of a Website on an MP's Roles.

5.3.1 Specialism

Websites appear to help MPs publicise their role as a specialist, with 87% of respondents to the MPs' questionnaire using their website to promote their own specialist interests in a wide range of topics. Some focused their specialist activity on major issues of the day, especially Iraq and ID cards, but most covered issues of long-standing interest to them. For example, Diane Abbott (Lab) has campaigned on behalf of London Schools and the Black Child. This was originally a campaign based around her constituency, but has since expanded. Michael Foster (Lab) used his website to promote his long standing campaign to abolish fox hunting. Derek Wyatt (Lab) promotes the fact that he is interested in the development and use of Information Technology. The emphasis on national issues supports the Burkean tradition of an MP's role.

Gender and seniority appear to have no effect on who is likely to use their website to promote a specialism. We can identify two possible influences: party and marginality have minor impact. Of all Conservatives with a website, 85% use their website to promote their specialisms, 87% of Labour MPs and 90% of Liberal Democrats. There also appears to be a slight link with marginality, with 95% of MPs in marginal seats promoting a specialism, 88% of near-marginals and 86% of those in safe seats. Those MPs who may rely more on their own activity, rather than their party label to get re-elected, may be more likely to promote their specialist activity as part of justifying what they do for the constituency.

The interviews identified two strands to how and why MPs used their website to promote their specialist interests. Of the twelve respondents, seven suggested that the website enables them to communicate what they want one-way. Typical of this approach is Kerry Pollard (Lab) who stated "*It (his website) helps me promote my agenda, so that I can say exactly what I want,*" (Pollard 2004) and so supports the Burkean ideal. Second, five respondents identified a possible interactive element to this feature. For example, Hywel Williams (PC) noted "*I am running a campaign locally on childcare, and I thought that my website might stimulate political interest in such issues,*" (Williams 2005) so enhancing constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). Respondents choosing the latter approach were the five most enthusiastic towards the Web. Common to all twelve is the importance of a website in helping an MP control the promotion of their message, as suggested by Austin Mitchell (Lab) who commented "*Backbenchers get few opportunities to give their views to a wider public.*" (Mitchell 2006) A website, therefore, provides an MP with a greater degree of

control over the messages that constituents might receive about their activities, but can encourage some interaction if that is seen as desirable by the MP.

5.3.2 *Scrutiny*

Just over three-quarters, 76%, of the MPs' websites assessed can be interpreted as promoting their executive scrutiny role. Most commonly this is achieved by an MP pointing out what Parliamentary Questions they have asked on behalf of constituents; Early Day Motions (EDMs) they have signed; committees they belong to; and activity during the passage of legislation. For example, Vincent Cable (Lib Dem) listed some of the Parliamentary Questions he has asked, linked both to his portfolio and possible constituency concerns. Michael J Foster (Lab) explained that he chaired a Parliamentary committee looking at changes in tax bands. Stephen Hesford (Lab) listed the Backbench Parliamentary Groups he is a member of, and Michael Jack (Lab) explained his Select Committee work. A slightly smaller number stressed the work they had done to further their specialisms by seeking to change legislation. For example, Mark Todd (Lab) pointed out that he piloted a Private Members Bill, *The Co-operatives and Community Benefit Societies Act 2003* through the annual ballot ⁽²⁾, and Jane Griffiths (Lab) explained that as part of her campaign on the abandonment of cars she secured an Adjournment Debate ⁽³⁾. Some MPs even list in more detail the parliamentary scrutiny work they have specifically done on behalf of constituents; James Gray (Cons) listed the letters to Ministers he had sent on behalf of constituents, and presented a petition to Parliament regarding a local campaign concerning the closure of a hospital. Publicising this type of work via their website reinforces the image MPs want to project to visitors, in particular, that they work hard for their constituents. The use of a website is weighted more to promoting an MP's scrutinising role to a wider audience, rather than actually a means for helping them conduct this role.

Very few interview respondents directly mention that a website is used to promote their scrutiny role. Indeed, only two interviewees made any reference to a scrutiny role, both of whom stressed that they do so because it helps them serve constituents. Robert Key (Cons) provides an interesting possible model for others to consider using.

This page (*E-politics*) allows me to publish all my letters and those I get in return from Ministers and officials on a campaign which allows me to get raw news through to constituents. When there is a big campaign going on, this type of information is massively important. For example, last year there was a campaign to save a school in Farley, and people were able to trace back all the official letters with Ministers and

local council officials about the campaign. This is a good example of a huge benefit of a website that people can see exactly what you are doing. (Key 2006)

This links the scrutiny and constituency role. Matt Rogerson, researcher to Liam Byrne, (2006) takes this a stage further and suggests that to some extent it is his employer, Liam Byrne, who is being scrutinised via the website: *“It helps us if a constituent asks what we have done on a particular issue, we can see what we have done, and if there are any gaps we can identify these.”* There is no obvious explanation as to why these two MPs take this view, but in doing so their website helps constituents scrutinise them, an adjunct of the constituency service model (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006).

5.3.3 Partisan

There is evidence (table 5.1) that MPs use their website to promote their party, with three of the six features present in 80% or more of those websites analysed. MPs clearly seek to use their website to promote their party’s policies and activities, suggesting that they do not totally control the the design or content of this medium. For example, a number of Labour MPs, such as Graham Allen use the ‘*Web in the Box scheme*’⁽⁴⁾ with some pages, such as ‘*National News*’, provided by the national party. It is also interesting to note that nearly a third, 27%, use content provided by their national party, for example, Robert Key (Cons), Russell Brown (Lab) and Tom Brake (Lib Dem). There is little or no evidence that MPs use their website to promote election campaigns, but this could be because there were few during the time of the content analysis. Less than a fifth, 17%, of MPs’ websites encouraged people to join or help the party, suggesting MPs either do not believe a website will encourage membership, or they are concerned that a publicly funded website should not be used for this purpose. Therefore, MPs are willing to promote their party’s policies and activities, but are less likely to encourage visitors to get directly involved with party activity. This might suggest that MPs view the purpose of their website to inform, but not to mobilise (Kraut *et al.* 2003).

Table 5.1 How a website helps an MP fulfil their roles (partisan)

| Category | Percentage of MPs meeting this criteria |
|---|---|
| 3. Partisan Role | |
| Promotes party policy | 355 (85%) |
| Promotes local party activity | 355 (85%) |
| Promotes national party activity | 346 (82%) |
| Encourages party membership/support | 70 (17%) |
| Promotes party election campaigns | 11 (3%) |
| Uses content provided by national party | 115 (27%) |

There are two clear characteristics of those MPs who are most likely to use their website to promote their party's policies. First, party does affect whether websites are used for this purpose, with the Liberal Democrats at 92% the most likely, Labour at 87% the next and lagging some way behind are Conservatives at 75%. Second, marginality has an impact, with marginals most likely at 92%, then near-marginals at 87% and last safe seats at 83%. These findings are consistent with previous research (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005), that the use of a website as a partisan tool is influenced by which party an MP represents, and how close their electoral contest is.

There are close similarities between the profile of those MPs who promote local and national party activity. For both features, those aged under 55 are more likely to promote party activity, as are those elected in 2001, 1997 and 1992. This suggests that newer and younger MPs may be less independent in terms of policy. The Liberal Democrats are the most likely to promote party activity, Labour next with the Conservatives trailing some way behind. This might be due to the fact that the Liberal Democrats as the third party need to use all opportunities to counter the lower profile they have. The Conservatives' lower response could be due to the culture of the party itself. One very clear trend is that marginality has an effect: MPs in more marginal seats are the most likely to promote party activity. For both local and national party activity 92% of marginals and 88% of near-marginals provided these activities, but for safe seats the responses were 83% and 80% respectively. This might reflect the fact that marginals seats are likely to receive more funding from the party headquarters, which in turn may insist on greater promotion of party policy.

The interviews suggest that there is a clear difference in approach by MPs towards whether their website is a partisan tool. First, the slight majority (five) do not see their website as a partisan campaigning tool. For example, Peter Atkinson's (Cons) researcher James Cook pointed out "*We do not use it for campaigning, especially as the website is funded by Parliamentary funds.*" (Cook 2004) Instead, a number of MPs stressed different features/benefits of their website. For example, Liam Byrne's (Lab) researcher Matt Rogerson suggests that "*We are keen to see our website as a community portal therefore, the website is not just about self-publicity, but also something deeper.*" (Rogerson 2006) Second, two MPs suggest that the website is, at least in part, a partisan tool. Alan Whitehead (Lab) stated that "*I use it (his website) as a notice board to promote me and the local association.*" (Whitehead 2005) Robert Key (Cons) explained how he uses material from

party headquarters to add flavour to his website *“I get information emailed to me each day from Conservative Party headquarters from which I take what I want and add my own views.”* (Key 2006) There is no obvious explanation as to why these MPs take different approaches, but they are not necessarily incompatible, rather that some MPs stress different aspects of their website than others. Indeed one MP, Vincent Cable (Lib Dem), appears to see no contradiction in stressing both. As a constituency MP, his researcher notes *“We did not want to make the site incredibly political, so it is not designed to sell us.”* (Saunders 2005). However, as the Liberal Democrats’ Treasury spokesperson he takes a slightly different view suggesting that *“On a national scale when we are presenting our economic policies we use the website to persuade people of our policies.”* (Saunders 2005) MPs are wary of using a publicly funded channel for overt campaigning, however, they do appear to recognise that a website provides a way of shaping how themselves and their party is perceived.

5.3.4 Constituency role

There is limited evidence (table 5.2) that MPs use their website to support their constituency role. A website was judged to promote their constituency role with two features in particular, speaking for the constituency, 85%, and providing local information, 63%. The former is clearly a traditional role that MPs have conducted through other communication channels such as news releases, meetings and speeches. However, the latter is a feature of the constituency role which appears to be new, where an MP’s website acts like an ‘information portal’ highlighting what is going on within the community which might be of interest to constituents. For example, Colin Breed (Lib Dem) mentions the Whitsand Bay website as a means of promoting, and conserving, the area. Nearly a third, 27%, mentioned either individual constituents or groups of constituents by name, typically this is when the MP meets them. MPs regularly mention local people, in part to explain what they have done on their behalf, but also presumably in the hope that they will visit their website as a result, and to encourage other local people also to visit. By promoting the activities of local communities, an MPs’ website is adding value to the constituency. For example, Bob Marshall-Andrews (Lab) provides links to some 14 organisations within his constituency/region. The MP is not directly promoting what they do, but by promoting what others do in the constituency the website adds value to the local community. By promoting local community activities and providing local information, MPs’ websites facilitate citizen engagement in the local community (Della Carpini 2000).

One MP, Robert Key (Cons), has a ‘constituents only’ section (*How May I Help You*) on his website, tailored purely to their needs. To access this, the visitor needs to provide a constituency post code and then has access to four different pages. First, there are useful local Web links to organisations such as the local media. Second, only constituents are given Robert’s email address so they can contact him. Third, there is a constituency map which provides details of a range of services within the area such as who a person’s local councillor is, or how to get an allotment. Fourth, there is a directory of local numbers for local agencies and emergency services. *How May I Help You* is a good (but rare) example of using a website as a narrowcast, as opposed to broadcast, channel. By acting like an ‘information portal’, MPs like Key hope that their website is adding value for their constituents, and making the website more ‘sticky’(Jackson 2003).

Table 5.2 How a website helps an MP fulfil their roles (constituency role)

| Category | Percentage of MPs meeting this criteria |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 4. Constituency Role | |
| Mentions individual constituents | 112 (27%) |
| Speaks for constituency | 357 (85%) |
| Seeks views on national issues | 46 (11%) |
| Seeks views on local issues | 49 (12%) |
| Provides local information | 265 (63%) |
| Promotes local community activities | 62 (15%) |

The single most popular characteristic which appears to influence whether a website mentions each feature is age of the MP. In particular, the youngest MPs are much more likely to use a website for their constituency role. The other four age groups have very similar, and much lower, response rates. This might suggest that the Burkean approach is gradually ‘dying out’ as younger MPs reject it. However, as a corollary to this, the data does not necessarily support Norton’s view (1994) that new MPs have to build up a local profile as the 2001 cohort are only the third most likely to have this feature. Age, rather than when elected, is crucial to encouraging the constituency role. This implies that there will be a generational change where each new tranche of younger MPs will be more likely to use their website to develop their constituency role.

Speaking for the constituency in general is the most popular feature of the constituency role. Two characteristics appear to have some impact on why some MPs rather than others are more likely to stress the constituency role. First, when elected, with the cohorts from 2001 back to 1983 all being in the range 83% to 91%, but then a drop to 64% (1979), 53% for

1974 and 75% for before 1974. Second, there is a clear link with marginality with marginal seats most likely (92%), then near-marginals (90%) and then safe seats (83%). Again, this supports Norton's (1994) view that newer and younger MPs seek to use constituency activity to establish their reputation.

Seeking feedback from visitors to the website on either local or national issues is not very popular. However, both age and cohort do have some effect on the use of a website for this purpose. When seeking views on local and national issues, those aged 44 and under are at least twice as likely as the other age groups to seek feedback. Similarly, the 2001 and 1997 cohorts are again at least twice as likely as the other cohorts to encourage feedback. This is further evidence, in line with Norton (1994), that younger and newer MPs seek to use their website to help raise their profile with constituents.

There are three other factors which, to varying degrees, may influence whether MPs seek feedback on local and national issues. First, is seniority which further supports the point above about newer MPs being more likely to seek feedback. With 12% of backbench MPs seeking views on local issues, as opposed to 7% of frontbenchers. Similarly, for seeking views on national issues the percentages are 13% and 7% respectively. Second, gender appears to have some effect, especially on national issues. The percentage of males seeking local and national feedback is 10%, but for females it is 16% and 20% respectively. Third, party appears to have an effect with the Liberal Democrats most likely to seek feedback (18% for local and 24% national), Labour 11% for both, and the Conservatives 8% and 7% respectively. The combination of seniority, gender and party suggests that those who might be considered outwith the established Parliamentary elite may be more likely to seek policy feedback. Seeking policy feedback as part of being an active constituency MP, may be a means by which these MPs attempt to establish their credibility and distinctiveness.

The likelihood of providing local information via their website is fairly even for most MPs' characteristics. There are three factors which have some effect on why some MPs are more likely than others to stress this feature. First, age, with those aged 55 and over slightly less likely to provide local information. Second, similarly, those elected in 1974 and before are only two-thirds as likely as other cohorts to provide local information via their website. Third, closeness of the electoral contest may have an effect, with 69% of marginal seats, 68% of near-marginal and 61% of safe seats providing local information. Therefore, newer and

younger MPs and those in closer electoral contests, may be keener to attract visitors to their website by providing an information portal of non-political added value.

As with providing local information, promoting local community activities is an area where MPs have devoted little effort in their offline communication. However, unlike promoting local information, there appears to be very little which influences which MPs might encourage the dissemination of local community activity. The only possible factor is that the younger MPs (34 and under) are nearly twice as likely to promote local community activities as those aged 65 and over. However, there is no obvious explanation of this as neither cohort nor seniority appears to be a factor. Therefore, at present the decision to promote local community activity appears to be a purely personal decision.

The interview responses highlights that the content analysis may have missed interesting data regarding the different views of MPs towards the impact of their website on their constituency role. MPs are not necessarily in agreement as to whether their website is a means of reaching their constituents. Four respondents, such as one Labour MP noted that *“I expect only a tiny fraction (of constituents) will access my website.”* Alan Whitehead (Lab) conducted datalog analysis of his website and found that *“What came as a surprise is that a good proportion of visitors come from beyond the constituency. For example, we get a lot of visitors from the USA, and I assume many of them are students working on assignments.”* (Whitehead 2005) Countering this, however, six MPs suggest that their website does encourage greater contact with their constituents. For example, Peter Atkinson (Cons) receives more casework via the website (Cook 2004), and datalog analysis of usage on Vincent Cable’s (Lib Dem) website found that visitors tend to look at the local issues, suggesting they are constituents (Saunders 2005). The only difference between these two approaches was that two well-known web-enthusiasts did not believe that it helped them reach constituents. For some MPs, therefore, a website is clearly an important communication channel for reaching constituents, but for others the target audience may be much wider in scope. For both types of MP, however, their website has value as a communication channel.

However, twenty one interviewees did suggest that one of the purposes for having a website was that it was another way of reaching constituents. This suggests as supplementary means of communicating with constituents, MPs view a website as a means of enhancing the constituency role. This would explain why the content analysis found that speaking for the

constituency was the most popular of the constituency roles. Many MPs use their website as a one-way communication channel to promote their views, and what they are doing for constituents. However, a limited number of MPs appear to be developing a completely different model for how they use their website as part of their constituency role. Judith Attar, research assistant to Martin Linton (Lab), pointed out that *“We wanted our website to decrease the distance between voters and elected representatives.”* (Attar 2005) Matt Rogerson suggests that the ‘Notice Board’ page of their website *“Has all the hallmarks of a village notice board.”* (Rogerson 2006) This alternative model, the preserve of those who were more enthusiastic towards the Internet, suggests that a website may be used as a means of developing a more direct, and intimate, form of representation whose impact is to enhance the traditional representative role. For most MPs a website is augmentary, but for a small minority it is transformative by encouraging non-partisan contact between MPs and constituents.

5.4 How MPs Communicate to Constituents Via Their Website

5.4.1 Communication features on MPs’ websites

Table 5.3 identifies a clear split between those channels MPs use their website to amplify their messages, and those they do not. The data suggests that seven features are regularly found on MPs websites, but that the remaining ten are not. The two most popular features, contact details and an email contact form, are clearly interlinked. MPs want constituents to be able to contact them, especially concerning individual casework. Therefore, MPs use a website to encourage such casework in a way that their offline communication rarely does. The third, fourth, sixth and seventh most popular uses promote the traditional communication aspects of media relations - press releases, speeches, and campaigns. However, MPs do not appear to use their website as an effective means of mobilising support either for their individual campaigns, or their local party, though they might during election campaigns. Although these MPs have a website, other Internet channels, in the form of e-newsletters, 14%, weblogs, 3%, SMS, 1%, are not heavily promoted or used. Moreover, a range of direct communication channels, such as public meetings and newsletters receive little promotion. Therefore, most MPs use their website to help them promote their messages and activities via traditional mass media, with the addition of directly facilitating constituency casework.

Table 5.3 The communication features used by MPs' websites

| Feature | Percentage of MPs whose website provides this feature |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Contact details (1) | 399 (95%) |
| Email contact form (2) | 356 (85%) |
| Promotes campaigns (3) | 335 (80%) |
| Press releases (4) | 333 (79%) |
| Surgery details (5) | 274 (65%) |
| Promotes speeches (6) | 212 (51%) |
| Promotes media coverage (7) | 175 (41%) |
| Printed newsletters (8) | 95 (23%) |
| Promotes local membership (9) | 69 (16%) |
| Subscribe to e-newsletter (10)* | 58 (14%) |
| Asks for volunteers (11) | 37 (9%) |
| Leaflets/posters (12) | 36 (9%) |
| Events calendar (12) | 36 (9%) |
| Fundraising (14) | 17 (4%) |
| Weblog * (15) | 12 (3%) |
| Promotes public meetings (16) | 11 (3%) |
| SMS text messaging service (17) | 3 (1%) |

* Note this is the number who claim they offer an e-newsletter or weblog, not the number who have been recorded as actually having one.

Given that there appears to be a vast difference in the popularity of the first seven features as opposed to the other ten, the analysis will focus on these. Of the personal characteristics, age and gender have some effect. Age appears to have some influence on four of the top seven features. Younger MPs are more likely to promote their press releases, with the three age groups up to 55 scoring between 83-86%, and the two oldest age ranges scoring 74-76%. They are also more likely to promote their surgery details with, for example, 71% of those aged 34 and under, as opposed to 52% of those aged 54 and over. There is an apparent link with promoting speeches, with 71% of the 34 and under doing so, decreasing slightly with each cohort until only 42% of the 65 and over. There is a very similar trend with those who promote media coverage, with 71% of those aged under 34, steadily declining until 36% of those aged 65 and over. This is consistent with Negrine and Lilleker's (2003) view that younger MPs are more likely to use media relations to raise their profile.

Gender also appears to influence four of the top seven features. Women are slightly more likely to provide their contact details (100% as opposed to 94% of men), promote their campaigns (86% versus 78% for men) and surgery details (70% as opposed to 64%). Men are slightly more likely to promote their speeches (52% as opposed to 45%). Women, as a less-established group of MPs, appear to be using their websites in a different way from men. By using a website to help raise their profile, women MPs are bypassing both the party and traditional media as a channel of communication.

Political characteristics appear to have some influence, but not as much as the personal. Seniority appears to influence two of the features, with backbenchers more likely to promote their campaigns (82% as opposed to 75% of frontbenchers), and to promote their press releases (83% as opposed to 70% of frontbenchers). Party appears to shape the use of three features, with the Liberal Democrats most likely to provide an email contact form (94% Liberal Democrats, 85% Labour, 80% Conservatives) and promote their press releases (90% Liberal Democrats, 79% Conservative, 78% Labour). Labour are the most likely to promote their surgery details (73% Labour, 55% Conservative, 53% Liberal Democrat), which might reflect the fact that the Labour Party hierarchy has encouraged MPs to have 'constituency weeks' (Power 1998b). Those MPs in marginal seats are most likely to provide contact details, 100%, a contact form, 90%, promote press releases, 87%, and promote surgery details, 74%. However, in each case safe seats are slightly more likely than near-marginal seats to provide such a feature. This would suggest that those not considered part of the parliamentary establishment, in order to help amplify their message are more likely to use their website to reinforce messages made elsewhere in the traditional media. It is also likely that they want to highlight messages which may not have been picked up by the mass media, and therefore a website helps them bypass a media they may receive limited coverage from.

5.4.2 Is a website part of an integrated communication approach?

Not unsurprisingly, the vast bulk of MPs (315) can be classified as using their website as part of a semi-integrated communication channel, with 4-7 of the communication features present on their website. The next largest group (65) are classified as using their website as an integrated communication channel with 8 or more features. Only forty MPs have an unintegrated website communication approach with only three or less features present on their website. That only forty are unintegrated suggests that the majority of MPs with a website recognise that it helps promote, and reinforce, the other communication channels they use.

The actual number of features that MPs use in their websites is only part of the story: it is quite clear from the interviews that many MPs were aware of the link between their website and the other communication channels they use. The strongest link between the use of the website and other channels MPs refer to is media relations. Unprompted, seven MPs made specific reference to the fact that their website supported their media relations. For example, Judith Attar, research assistant to Martin Linton (Lab), noted *“I also find it links with our other communication, for example, if I write a letter to the local newspaper then it can be put on the website, and if we write something on the website it might become a letter to the local press.”* (Attar 2005) Therefore, MPs seem to recognise that their website helps reinforce messages sent by other means, especially those sent to the media.

However, as well as using their website to support their media relations activities, MPs also use it as an alternative to media relations. Unprompted, six of the most Internet savvy MPs pointed out that their website provided a means of bypassing the media, and communicating directly with constituents. This supports Coleman’s view (2005) that direct communication assists the development of direct representation. For example, Robert Key (Cons) pointed out that his *My Views* page *“Allows me to cut out the middle man”*. (Key 2006) Paul Flynn (Lab) suggested that *“The more I can bypass the local media the better. This is all building up to direct, unedited and unspun communication, which for me is the main purpose of the Internet.”* (Flynn 2004) Therefore, some MPs have recognised that a website provides a means of direct unadulterated communication with constituents. This implies implies greater control of an MP’s message through direct communication, and the enhancement of the representative process (Coleman 2005).

5.5 Are MPs Following Website Best Practice?

5.5.1 Structure

MPs have essentially grasped the basic format required by Web technologies. As table 5.4 shows MPs are now generally aware of the basic structure required for constructing and using websites (Williams *et al.* 2002). The only areas of structure where MPs do not always meet best practice is with the use of a search engine/site map to assist the visitors’ navigation of the website. There is a suggestion that in recent years MPs have become more aware of the importance of these structural aspects of their website. For example, Jackson (2003) noted that 78% of websites met the brevity test and 52% were ‘sticky’. By 2005 these figures had risen to 94% and 71% respectively. Indeed, even the use of a search engine/site

map increased from 9% to 32%. That these structural aspects have improved, in part, reflects that MPs have greater experience of websites now, but it also implies an enhanced role for a website. For example, a website which is ‘sticky’ requires a lot of regular maintenance to ensure that it is updated frequently. That the number of those websites which are ‘sticky’ has increased from 52 to 71% implies that more MPs are allocating greater resources to the management of their websites.

The only factors which appear to influence which MPs are more likely to have a well-structured website are age, cohort and party. The younger age groups, 44 and under are slightly more likely to have a search engine, to enmesh and have a ‘sticky’ website. The websites of those elected in 1979, 1974 and before 1974 are at least half as likely as the other five cohorts to be ‘sticky’. The Liberal Democrats are the most likely party to enmesh, 65%, and be ‘sticky’, 85%, with Conservatives, 43%, the least likely to enmesh, and Labour, 66%, the least likely to be ‘sticky’. It is worth noting that none of the interviews made direct reference to the importance of the structure of the website.

Table 5.4 Are MPs following Best Practice in using a website?

| Category | Percentage of MPs’ websites meeting this criteria |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Structure | |
| Search engine/site map | 135 (32%) |
| Enmeshing | 207 (49%) |
| Brevity | 395 (94%) |
| Sticky | 299 (71%) |
| 2. Content | |
| National policy | 374 (89%) |
| Local policy | 367 (87%) |
| 3. Campaigning tool | |
| Asks visitor to do something | 114 (27%) |
| Seeks donations | 21 (5%) |
| Promotes national campaigns | 364 (87%) |
| Promotes local campaigns | 364 (87%) |
| Seeks volunteers | 36 (9%) |
| Seeks membership | 40 (10%) |
| Seeks to mobilise support | 29 (7%) |
| Two-way communication | |
| Seeks feedback | 93 (22%) |
| Two-way asymmetrical communication | 68 (16%) |
| Two-way symmetrical communication | 39 (9%) |
| Level of interactivity with visitor | Low - 320 (76%) Medium - 60 (14%) High - 40 (10%) |

5.5.2 Content

It is not unsurprising that the vast majority of websites stress the importance of content, after all they are trying to inform and persuade. That the response for local and national content is about the same implies that MPs do not see one as more important than the other as part of this information and persuasion process. However, for MPs the value of the website is not just whether the content is national or local, rather as Robert Key (Cons) points out there is a matter of control: *“With my own website, I can give as much space as I want to an issue.”* Key (2006) Websites are clearly used to promote party, and an MP’s own, policy.

5.5.3 Campaigning

The effectiveness of any website is also influenced by how content is used. As a direct form of communication, websites offer the potential for supporting MPs’ campaigns, both of a party and issue-based nature. It is not enough to have something to say to the visitor: the full impact of a website requires asking the visitor to do something with the information provided. In other words, the ‘ask’ is a means of not just providing information and trying to persuade, but also to mobilise. Whilst there is no typical approach by the 27% of websites which ask visitors to do something, the most popular encourage visitors to complete opinion polls and surveys. In addition, MPs request visitors get involved in a number of different activities. For example, a number of Labour MPs, such as Laura Moffett, Margaret Moran, Andrew Miller and Diana Organ encouraged people to visit either the Big Conversation or Proud of Britain websites. This suggests a very partisan approach to the use of their websites. A limited number of MPs sought views on policy issues, for example, Diana Organ specifically asked for visitors’ views on ID cards. However, most of this is fairly passive, and only a limited number of websites sought to mobilise support. For example, the websites of Sarah Teather (Lib Dem), Mike Hancock (Lib Dem), Chris Grayling (Cons) asked visitors to sign e-petitions. Some MPs are soliciting visitors’ views, but very few are then trying to gain support from those who contact them.

Given that the response for promoting local personal and national party campaigns is high, the analysis will focus on whether there are factors which influence the likelihood of the other five features being present. Personal characteristics clearly have some effect. For three features (asks the visitor to do something, seeks volunteers and seeks to mobilise support), the response rate was highest with MPs under 34 and those elected in 2001, and declined in nearly every subsequent age/cohort grouping. Gender only appeared to influence those MPs who asked a visitor to do something, with 36% of women and 25% of men. Such personal

characteristics suggest that younger, recently elected, or female MPs are more likely to consider the campaigning and mobilising possibilities of their website. Such generational factors imply that the use of a website as a campaigning tool will grow in usage as the age and gender profile of MPs gradually changes (Norton 1994).

Political characteristics are far and away the strongest factors influencing the likelihood of MPs using their website as a campaigning tool. Party and marginality was a factor in all five features, and seniority in all but seeking donations. As table 5.5 shows, the Liberal Democrats are the most likely to use their website for campaigning purposes. This could be that Liberal Democrat MPs, as the third party, feel they need to be more active and use any communication opportunity presented to help inform, persuade and mobilise support. In addition, the consistency of their campaigning across websites, suggests that Liberal Democrat Head Office have been successful in encouraging a more uniform use of these features.

Table 5.5 The impact of party on the use of a website as a campaigning tool

| Activity | Labour | Conservative | Lib Dem |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Asks visitor to do something | 65 (26%) | 18 (17%) | 29 (57%) |
| Seeks donations | 11 (4%) | 1 (1%) | 9 (18%) |
| Seeks volunteers | 11 (4%) | 5 (5%) | 20 (39%) |
| Seeks membership | 13 (5%) | 5 (5%) | 22 (43%) |
| Seeks to mobilise support | 11 (4%) | 4 (4%) | 14 (27%) |

As table 5.6 shows, in all five cases marginal seats were by far the most likely to seek to mobilise support. Although adding to the exact detail of how MPs in marginal seats use their website, this finding is consistent with earlier research (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). Those MPs likely to be in closer electoral contests believe their website may help them achieve tangible campaigning benefits, in the form of extra resources, which may help them in the constituency.

Table 5.6 The impact of marginality on the use of a website as a campaigning tool

| Activity | Marginal | Near marginal | Safe |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Asks visitor to do something | 17 (44%) | 21 (30%) | 76 (25%) |
| Seeks donations | 4 (10%) | 2 (3%) | 15 (5%) |
| Seeks volunteers | 7 (18%) | 4 (8%) | 25 (8%) |
| Seeks membership | 9 (23%) | 5 (7%) | 26 (8%) |
| Seeks to mobilise support | 8 (21%) | 2 (3%) | 19 (6%) |

The interview responses support the main findings of the content analysis. Seven respondents specifically noted that they did not seek to use their website as a campaigning tool. Four of these, (James Cook, research assistant to Peter Atkinson, Cons), Tom Harris (Lib Dem), Desmond Swayne (Lab) and David Liddington (Cons) stated that this was because their website was funded from parliamentary expenses, and therefore could not be used for campaigning purposes. Two respondents, Alan Whitehead (Lab) and Ian Lucas (Lab) point out that they suspect the majority of users are not constituents, therefore, such campaigning would have a limited effect. The last, Chris Mole (Lab), has not tried to use his website to campaign or seek members. This suggests that MPs are either not attuned to the campaigning possibilities their website offers, or they believe that with current funding arrangements they cannot use it for this purpose.

However, some MPs have identified campaigning benefits. Graham Leadbetter, research assistant to Angus Robertson (SNP), noted that

In terms of our own campaigns it (their website) has been quite helpful, although it is not a substitute for knocking on doors and seeing people in the street. We can get publicity for our campaigns by writing press releases on what is on the website, which then encourages people to sign up via the website. (Leadbetter 2005)

Leadbetter is implying that the website is a useful campaigning adjunct, but Matt Rogerson, research assistant to Liam Byrne (Lab), goes further,

We have been able to use the website to mobilise support. For example, we recently had a campaign on litter, and we asked people to email in their opinions on whether they thought the street cleaning services had got better or not. We were able to use the letters and emails to explain to the council what people thought, and in turn we used the statistics in our local newsletter. (Rogerson 2006)

The experience of these MPs suggests that a website has some campaigning value, though we can distinguish between that used to benefit the party, and that which benefits a wider ‘public good’, as with the example of litter. The latter is more commonly found in MPs websites. For example, a website appears to have only very limited success in encouraging membership. Only two respondents, Chris Saunders, research assistant to Vincent Cable (Lib Dem), and Lembit Opik (Lib Dem), suggested that membership was generated via the website, but clearly the numbers are small. *“We certainly have had a few people who have become members. Whether they would have become members if they had seen the leaflets only, it is difficult to tell. My gut feeling is that the website has probably got us some new*

members in addition to the print material.“ (Saunders 2005). At best a website has generated a few more members and helped to promote some campaigns, which is not a ringing endorsement of its mobilising properties.

5.5.4 Two-way communication

Given the existing literature (Castells 2002, Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005) it is not really a surprise that MPs are not fully utilising their website as a means of encouraging a two-way dialogue with constituents. Rather, MPs' websites are still essentially a one-way communication tool. However, the level of interactivity appears to be slowly increasing as more MPs believe it adds value. For example, the 22% who seek feedback is significantly higher than what Jackson (2003) identified.

Seeking feedback is not enough to suggest the existence of a conversation between an MP and website visitors. Examples of two-way symmetrical communication include the opinion polls by John Denham (Lab), Richard Ottawa (Cons) and Alistair Carmichael (Lib Dem) because they publish the results of the polls, and then explain what impact such feedback has had on them. Tim Collins (Cons) provides an '*E-Village Hall*' where people ask him questions to which his responses are clear and transparent. Andrew Murrison's (Cons) '*Chatboard*', and David Drew's (Lab) '*Have Your Say*' both encourage a dialogue with website visitors. Asymmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984) implies that MPs use interactive features either merely to appear to be asking for views, or ask for feedback solely so that they can be more persuasive in their messages in the future. For example, a number of MPs have opinion polls, but there is a sense that the purpose of such polls is to make it appear that the MP is listening. In reality, such MPs do not actually appear to be listening, for example, the results are not published nor is there any indication what impact the results had. A few MPs such as Jim Sheridan (Lab) and Ian Casey (Lab) have '*Guest Books*' which invite visitors to post comments. This encourages feedback, but there is no obvious evidence of what the MP does with such opinion ⁽⁵⁾. The content analysis suggests that approximately half of the MPs who seek feedback (about 9% of the total) do so to encourage two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984), which creates a 'conversation' and offers the possibility that the MP may modify their views. The other half (probably 10-12% of the total) are not really using it to encourage dialogue. Therefore, possibly only a tenth of MPs with a website are using it to actively engage in a conversation with visitors, the rest are engaged in a monologue.

Personal characteristics have some influence as to which MPs are more likely to seek feedback. Age does appear to have some effect on whether MPs seek feedback, use both asymmetrical and symmetrical communication and have a high level of interactivity with the visitor. Those aged 44 and under are consistently more likely to encourage some form of interaction. For example, 29% of those aged 34 and under have a high level of interaction, but this declines with every age group until only 3% of those aged 65 and over are classified as having high interactivity. Similarly, cohort has an impact, those elected in 2001 have the highest response rate at 36%, as opposed to 9% of those elected in 1979. Gender does appear to have some impact, with women slightly more likely than men to use asymmetrical communication and have high levels of interactivity (21% and 14%, as opposed to 15% and 8% respectively for men). The results suggest that it is younger, newly elected and female MPs who are more likely to use some form of interaction via their website. The age and cohort findings imply a generational factor (Norton 1994), which suggests as each new generation enters Parliament, more MPs will use their website as a two-way communication tool.

The political characteristics clearly also have an effect. As table 5.7 shows, party is relevant to all four features of two-way communication. More importantly Labour and Conservatives have very similar response rates, and the Liberal Democrats are some way ahead. For example, where 19% of the two main parties seek feedback, more than double this, 43%, of Liberal Democrats seek feedback. That Liberal Democrats are more likely to engage in two-way communication could be due to the party's culture, more likely it is probably viewed as a means for MPs from the third party to more effectively persuade and mobilise their constituents.

Table 5.7 The impact of party on the use in websites of two-way communication

| Feature | Labour | Conservative | Lib Dem |
|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Seeks Feedback | 48 (19%) | 20 (19%) | 22 (43%) |
| Two-way asymmetrical communication | 35 (14%) | 15 (14%) | 15 (29%) |
| Two-way symmetrical communication | 20 (8%) | 8 (7%) | 10 (20%) |
| High Level of Interactivity | 19 (8%) | 8 (8%) | 12 (24%) |

The interviews suggest that there are two factors which act as obstacles to more MPs using interactivity. First, at least two interviewees pointed out that their existing resources were too limited. For example, Candy Atherton (Lab) would consider more interactive features but stated that she needed more time to allow her to do this (Atherton 2004). Second, for

those who had tried to introduce some form of interactivity, they do not have sufficient visitor numbers. Anne Begg (Lab) who has some interactive features on her site stated, *“If I develop the site, I may try to encourage a dialogue, but I simply do not have the number of visitors to make it worthwhile investing the resources. The potential is there, but at the moment my main interface with constituents is through my surgeries.”* (Begg 2004) Five other MPs noted that they had introduced interactive features, but that generally they have not succeeded because, they believe, of a lack of interest from their website visitors. For example, Alan Whitehead (Lab) stated

We did try to make the site more interactive, but it has been a mixed success. For example, I did have a dedicated ‘Talk to Alan’ page on the site, and a bulletin board for people to post ideas and talk to one another. That was the theory, but it did not work. I find it surprising that there is not a constituency out there who wants interactivity with their MPs website. (Whitehead 2005)

There is clearly a supply and demand issue, with many MPs suspecting that demand does not yet exist.

Two MPs identified what can be considered potential methodological problems with using interactive features on their website. Nigel Jones (Lib Dem) suggested that he did not use opinion polls *“Because they can get abused by political opponents.”* (Jones 2004) One anonymous backbench Labour MP who does use opinion polls is slightly wary about how much he can trust the results

There is a temptation amongst opinion poll correspondents to cheat a little. For example, when I put up an opinion poll on hunting with dogs, I got 200-300 against my position, many voting several times. So I am not sure they are a true reflection of my constituents’ views. That said, it is useful to see what kind of response I get.

These two views imply that some MPs are unsure how much they can trust the accuracy of the feedback they receive.

Despite concerns over resources, visitor numbers and accuracy of response, a number of interview respondents identified that their website’s interactivity enabled them to identify more of their constituents’ problems. For example, Robert Newman, research assistant to Julie Morgan (Lab), noted that their ‘Guest Book’ encourages those who have never contacted their MP before *“Because they can leave a message”* (Newman 2005). Chris Grayling (Cons) responds individually to any posts on his *Have Your Say* section, and that this in turn *“Occasionally led to me doing something on their behalf.”* (Grayling 2006)

Andrew May, research assistant to Annette Brooke (Lib Dem), suggests that the survey on their website has a very important role. As noted by other MPs, it helps to identify constituents' problems, but he also identified a qualitative effect of this *"It attempts to improve the constituents' participation in the political process."* (May 2006) Qualitatively, for some pioneering MPs, a website does appear to be adding value to both them and their constituents.

It was clear from the interviews that at least five MPs viewed the website as an asymmetrical communication tool, and they admitted that the responses did not really have an impact on their policy views. Equally, however, five MPs were obviously using their website as a symmetrical communication tool, and so did adapt their views. This was usually for a more obscure issue or one on which their party had no stated policy. For example, Jane Griffiths (Lab) noted that the feedback she received via regular surveys *"Can have an effect on me on the smaller issues that I had not previously thought about. So the surveys have helped on the issues I know little about."* Griffiths (2005) The five MPs who encouraged symmetrical communication appeared slightly more interested in developing its wider impact beyond themselves. As a result, symmetrical interactivity may be supporting an e-representation model.

If adopted, the introduction of two-way symmetrical communication is likely to add to MPs' workload, and it may lessen their control on public debate. Yet, for a minority of MPs the use of symmetrical interactivity in their website implies a new model of representation. Contrary to Kraut *et al.* (2003), this is based not just on providing information, but also on building relationships, and hence a website could be used as unmediated communication channel which encourages dialogue within wider society.

5.6 Summary

A website does not appear to have a significant effect on an MP's workload, but it does help develop at least three of an MP's roles: specialism, scrutiny and partisanship. Particular characteristics, (age, cohort, party and marginality) influence which MPs are more likely to use their website for these features. Indeed, the data suggests that a website is helping to develop the constituency role so that it now includes promoting an 'information portal' to encourage local citizen engagement. As a consequence, a website is facilitating a change in an MP's role by making it more locally focused. The existence of a website is encouraging more MPs to become active in their local constituency because they can directly

communicate with constituents what they are doing on their behalf. This suggests that what matters is not whether an MP is mandated or a trustee, but that they believe a website can support their constituency service.

The majority of MPs in the sample recognise the structural requirements of a website, and many use it, at least in part, as part of a co-ordinated communication strategy. A website has not fundamentally altered the way most MPs work. However, a small minority, perhaps 30-40 appear to have a vision for how they are using their website. For about 20-25 MPs a website has had an augmentary effect, enhancing their representative role, but for 15-20 it has a transformative effect possibly signalling that they are motivated towards a model that is more about changing representation than just efficient communication.

Footnotes

(1) For respectively Angus Robertson (SNP), Peter Atkinson (Cons), Annette Brooke (Lib Dem) and Liam Byrne (Lab).

(2) Once a year (very often in November), backbench MPs can enter their name into a ballot for time to present their own piece of legislation. As a general rule any MP in the top six has a reasonable chance of enough Parliamentary time being made available to them for their Bill to pass if they can generate sufficient support amongst other MPs.

(3) An Adjournment Debate is called by an MP to which the relevant Minister usually replies. Although often held at less 'popular' times, and with few attendees, it does provide a useful device for a backbencher to raise issues of concern to them.

(4) The 'Web in the Box' is where a Labour MP's website is set up using software provided by the Labour Party's head office. As a result there is a similarity of such sites in presentation, look and some content.

(5) This does not mean they do nothing with it, rather that it is not transparent. Such 'Guest Books' may indeed be examples of symmetrical communication, but this is not apparent from content analysis of a website.

CHAPTER 6

MP'S USE OF EMAIL AND E-NEWSLETTERS

"In a way email is almost what I do as a job." Steve Webb MP, 10/12/04

6.1 Introduction

Email can be both an inbound and an outbound communication channel. As an inbound channel, email is largely driven by constituents and non-constituents who will ask questions, lobby or raise casework. Outbound email, such as e-newsletters, is a means by which MPs can inform, persuade and seek to mobilise colleagues, party members, constituents and other members of the public. An MP's capacity to send out outbound email may well be determined by the amount of inbound email they receive. There is likely to be an inverse relationship, in that the more inbound email an MP receives, the less capacity, due to limited time and resources, they will have to send out outbound email.

6.2 The Effect of Email on an MP's Workload

6.2.1 How MPs manage email

MPs respond to inbound email from constituents in a number of ways, table 6.1 identifies that the single most likely response, 41%, depends on the circumstances. The survey also suggests that with only 8% emailing a full response, email has not created paperless MPs' offices. Indeed, a number of MPs mentioned in the interviews that they specifically needed 'hard' copies for their records, supporting Fallow's (2002) view regarding the limited ability of email to handle sensitive issues. For example, Anne Begg (Lab) noted *"With casework I forward emails to my constituency office who reply to the email with a letter. I do this because I need a paper trail."* (Begg 2004) This suggests that, at present, email does not necessarily fit easily with an MP's traditional way of working. The impact of email is not just the amount of work it produces, but what effect this has on an MP's existing practice for handling constituency work.

Table 6.1 How an MP responds to an email from a constituent

| Response | Percentage of MPs |
|--|-------------------|
| Email an acknowledgement and post a full reply | 19 (19%) |
| Post an acknowledgement and post a full reply | 15 (15%) |
| Email an acknowledgement and email a full response | 8 (8%) |
| Either email or post depending on which is appropriate | 41 (41%) |
| Other | 13 (13%) |

Others include: Post full answer 7; Both post and email full answer 3; No acknowledgement, full reply by email 2; Telephone and email response 1.

As with other sections of society (Tassabehji and Vakola 2005), MPs have developed mechanisms for dealing with their emails. At least two respondents, Jane Griffiths (Lab) and Robert Key (Cons), specifically deal with their emails first thing in the morning. Tim Loughton (Con) tends to do his in the evenings, and then “*At the weekends I try to blitz my emails and deal with any that are left over from the week.*” (Loughton 2004) Nigel Jones (Lib Dem) takes a third approach dealing with them throughout the day, often replying immediately (Jones 2004). Each reflects different personal working styles, but they also indicate that to prevent email getting on top of them, many MPs have created systems for dealing with inbound email. Dealing with constituents’ emails is not an *ad hoc* operation.

When receiving emails from constituents, MPs also take into account how they will respond. Five of the interviewed MPs mentioned that essentially they deal with constituency email themselves. Seven interview respondents appear to use a combination, with the MP responding to some emails, and their staff the rest. For example, Steve Webb (Lib Dem) usually makes the initial reply, and then “*The bulk of the work is done by my office. The fact that I get to see the email coming in is useful to me in its own right.*” (Webb 2004) Only one interviewee’s office replies to all emails. The various different approaches appear to be a personal decision based on style rather than any other factors. On the whole, the interview data suggests that MPs want to be involved with inbound email from constituents. Email is a source of information which enables an MP to ‘take the pulse’ of their constituency.

Where there is a combination of the MP and their staff dealing with an email from constituents, the key factor is the nature of the inquiry - whether it is casework or policy. Most MPs deal with the policy issues, and they pass on to their office the constituency casework. Moreover, the general sense from the interviewees is that email is likely to lead to more policy inquiries, rather than casework. For example, Nick Palmer (Lab) noted “*Email*

has become the most common way for people to raise issues with me (about two-thirds of all enquiries). It lowers the threshold and people are much more likely to make minor points by email, typically on obscure aspects of policy." (Palmer 2005) Email, therefore, appears to have encouraged discussion of policy, and so enhanced the representative role.

One MP manages some inbound email through their website. As Judith Attar, research assistant for Martin Linton (Lab), explains *"One way we try to manage this (email) is to put something on the website about an issue, and then when we get an email about it we can reply thanking them for their email and giving them a link to what Martin has said."* (Attar 2005) This conceptual interlinking of a website and email saves some time by avoiding repetition of messages.

Based on the impact of their control of the Internet, MPs have identified a number of new problems which email potentially creates. First, three MPs pointed out that email can be an instant form of communication with inherent dangers. Candy Atherton (Lab) explained *"Early on in my parliamentary career, I received an angry email from a constituent which I opened at 9pm. I did not send my response until next morning, when having slept on it, I significantly amended my email."* (Atherton 2004) Second, email has not necessarily led to operational efficiencies, Andrew Bennett (Lab) notes that he has, in effect, *"Two filing systems, one for email, one for letters."* Bennett (2004) Chris Mole (Lab) makes a similar point that *"It (email) does not always mesh with our systems to track and log all incoming paper on a database."* Mole (2005) Third, email feeds an expectation amongst constituents that they will get a speedier reply from their MP. The questionnaire on MPs use of email found that 84%, of respondents felt that a new expectation had been created. Data from the interviews supports this impression. For example, Hywel Williams (PC) notes *"Email does tend to skew my responses, where letters might take 7-10 days for a reply to be received by the sender, but I can deal with email straight away. There is, therefore, an aura of importance about email."* (Williams 2005) Unlike most work-based email users (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005), MPs are concerned that email creates issues of control and response in how they manage their workload.

The nature of email has created a major concern for MPs, namely the desire to avoid a situation where those who have access to an email receive preferential service than those who do not. This is not a concern of other email users (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005), but all interview respondents who addressed this issue were clearly concerned that

those who emailed should not 'jump the queue' over those who write or attend surgeries. A typical response was from Kerry Pollard (Lab) who clearly stated "*We feel email should not get priority*" (Pollard 2004), though one other MP admitted that as they responded immediately their constituents probably did get a better service. One Labour MP tried to address this publicly by having "*An automatic email which when I receive one states that an email does not get priority because there is an expectation that you will get an immediate response. And that cannot happen.*" This concern reflects the fact that respondents believed that they did not fully control their email communication.

6.2.2 Email traffic from constituents

The number of emails from constituents, for most MPs, is low, with 87% of those who responded to the survey receiving less than 100 emails a week from constituents. Indeed, a number of respondents, unprompted, commented that the number of emails they received from constituents was in single figures each day. Whilst the interviews highlight a wide variety in the number received per week, they strongly support the survey's impression of a limited number of inbound emails from constituents. Of those interviewed the upper limit of constituent based emails was 100-150 per week, which three MPs recorded ⁽²⁾. The vast majority suggested that they tended to receive less than ten emails from constituents each day. On the face of it this does not suggest a huge additional burden.

That MPs believe email has increased their workload is due to contact by non-constituents. Table 6.2 shows that over half of respondents, 55%, suggested that more than half of their email in-tray was from outside the constituency. Indeed, one MP added a note that 98% of the emails they received were from non-constituents. The interviews strongly supported this finding. Of the twenty who spoke about the amount of email they receive, 10 suggested they received 90% or more of their email from non-constituents ⁽³⁾. This group of ten included those with a higher national media profile than the others, which might explain why more non-constituents contacted them. Not all of this email is unwelcome, as it includes email from party and parliamentary colleagues, and lobby groups they have an existing relationship with. However, this data does suggest that many MPs receive a lot of unsolicited email, because email is an easy and convenient channel to use. For example, Lembit Opik (Lib Dem) noted "*It is as easy to send an email to a hundred recipients as it is to one person.*" (Opik 2004) The reason that MPs response to email is different from other groups (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005) is probably explained by the fact that, as representatives the nature of their work is different.

Table 6.2 Percentage of emails from non-constituents

| Number of emails from non-constituents | Percentage of MPs |
|--|-------------------|
| Less than 10% | 14 (14%) |
| 11-20% | 6 (6%) |
| 21-30% | 10 (10%) |
| 31-40% | 4 (4%) |
| 41-50% | 10 (10%) |
| 51% and over | 55 (55%) |

6.2.3 The type of constituent who emails their MP

MPs who were interviewed detected a change in the nature of those who email them, as opposed to those who contact them by writing or attending surgeries. Fourteen respondents noted that email had encouraged a different type of constituent to contact them via this medium, with only two suggesting it made no difference. For example, Paul Flynn (Lab) said *“I do sometimes get people start their email with ‘this is the first time I have contacted an MP’, which may suggest that we are hearing from a different type of constituent.”* (Flynn 2004) Whilst there is not complete agreement on the exact profile of this new type of politically-interested constituent, MPs have identified traits of the individuals who email them. First, and foremost is that they are younger, for example, Paul Flynn had a local campaign about a family of asylum seekers which led a lot of younger people and children to email him (Flynn 2004). Second, they tend to be better educated, and, as a result *“They are very much to the point.”* (Saunders 2004) Third, many appear to be emailing from work, *“And might send me an email whilst having a coffee”* (Pollard 2004) This especially appears to be the case for those MPs representing London seats. Fourth, particular constituency factors may have an effect. For example, Lembit Opik noted that in his rural constituency he was receiving more emails from the remote parts (Opik 2004). Fifth, one MP noted that the informal style, and shortness of length, of emails was encouraging more contact from the depressed areas of their constituency (Begg 2004). Given the range of constituencies there is no obvious explanation for which MPs are being contacted by a different type of constituent, but email appears to be enhancing political engagement (Della Carpini 2000),

6.2.4 The effect of email on workload

There is an almost universal response from MPs that email has increased the workload of themselves and/or their staff, much more so than having a website ⁽⁴⁾. This suggests that MPs are part of the proportion of ‘power emailers’ (Fallows 2002) for whom email has led to an increase in work, both in and outside of the office. Largely the workload of the website is a proactive management one of updating it, whereas email is largely a reactive response to inbound communication. The raw figures from the survey do not necessarily give the full picture. Table 6.3 suggests that only 12% of respondents felt that they were not handling inbound email that well. Three characteristics increased the likelihood of MPs struggling with email, which are the same as those who are more likely to find a website has increased their workload. First, seniority, with 18% of backbenchers as opposed to no frontbenchers. This might be due to the fact that frontbenchers expect to receive more email, and may have additional resources to handle it, or that backbenchers actively seek more interaction with constituents. Second, party, with 20% of Liberal Democrats indicating that they may have a problem. This could reflect the fact that many Liberal Democrat MPs have traditionally cultivated their constituency which may increase the amount of inbound traffic. Third, 25% of responding MPs representing marginal seats are struggling. Constituents may recognise that in such circumstances they have added ‘leverage’ on their representatives. Although most MPs believe that they are able to handle the amount of inbound email, it is also clear that MPs feel that both the existence of email, and having a website, has increased their workload.

Table 6.3 How well is an MP coping with the volume of email they receive?

| How is an MP coping | Percentage of respondents |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Very well | 26 (26%) |
| Reasonably well | 35 (35%) |
| Adequately | 27 (27%) |
| Not very well | 5 (5%) |
| Badly | 7 (7%) |

From the interviews it is clear that many MPs are concerned about the possible effect of email on their ability to cope. Of the twenty five MPs who were asked in the interviews whether they were struggling, only one said yes, but the rest were all monitoring the situation. The concern many share is that the weight of email from lobbying groups, and not from constituents, could get out of hand. Certainly 91% of survey respondents had received

co-ordinated emailed campaign materials from pressure groups. Four interview respondents, Anne Begg (Lab), Chris Sanders (Lib Dem), Lembit Opik (Lib Dem) and Andrew May (Lib Dem), noted that email has automatically increased their workload. For example, Anne Begg (Lab) said *"I find that with a lot of emails I receive I have to email back checking that they are a constituent."* (Begg 2004) MPs, or their staff, have to open every email just to see if it is one they have to deal with, which means they are denied the primary time-saving technique other emailers use of prioritising who they respond to (Tassabehji and Vakola 2005). This is a time management issue which is inherent of email to MPs.

Email can encourage more constituents to contact their MP, which interviewees considered a good thing (Saunders 2004). Though if this creates a conversation, email can lead to more work. Andrew May, research assistant to Annette Brooke (Lib Dem), noted that there can be *"A 'ping pong' effect whereby people reply instantly with further queries or responses"* which increases work (May 2006). However, May is not necessarily suggesting that this is a problem, though one Labour MP suggested that one constituent became "a pest" when they emailed them every day about Iraq in 2005. There is a sense from the interviews that MPs are very happy to respond to constituents, and even develop a conversation, but that excessive 'ping pong' emailing on a point MPs clearly take a different view on is a problem.

6.3 The Use of E-newsletters

6.3.1 What is an e-newsletter?

An e-newsletter acts as a 'reminder facility' (Ollier 1998) whereby constituents regularly 'hear from' their representative. A constituent who is in regular receipt of a direct 'personalised' communication in the form of an e-newsletter cannot say they have not seen or heard from their MP. E-newsletters also offer MPs tangible benefits such as attracting volunteer help and encouraging feedback (Chaffey *et al.* 2003, Katz 2003, Miller 2003). Although e-newsletters are characterised as a 'push' mechanism (Ollier 1998) they need not be used just as a one-way route from sender to receiver. With the touch of the reply button the receiver can send back their solicited or unsolicited views. E-newsletters can enhance an MP's electoral prospects and facilitate their representative function.

Such benefits do not just automatically happen, MPs have to offer something in return, and the currency of e-newsletters is usually information not easily available elsewhere (Sterne 2001, Chaffey 2003). E-newsletters are not a hard-sell (Goldsborough 2002, Weil 2004), rather they are a means of exchanging ideas, views and news over a period of time. An e-newsletter is a regular communication process (Miller 2002, Klein 2002) whereby both

sender and receiver give something, whether it is information or feedback on that information. An e-newsletter need not, and indeed should not, exist just for the duration of an election campaign.

6.4 The Growth of MPs' E-newsletters

6.4.1 How many MPs have e-newsletters?

It has not been recorded who was the first MP to produce a regular e-newsletter, nor when such an e-newsletter was created, but MPs have been slow to adopt this new communication tool. Jackson (2005) found that only 4 respondents claimed to provide an e-newsletter. All four were from the Labour Party, one was in a near-marginal seat and the other three in safe seats. If the results of this survey were extended to all MPs with a website at the time, 2002, then only 10-12 MPs might have claimed to use this form of the Internet. E-newsletters were the preserve of a very small number of early adopters, who for personal reasons were interested in experimenting with an e-newsletter.

Within ten months (April 2003), the number of MPs offering visitors to their website the opportunity of signing up to their e-newsletter increased to nineteen (though this is greater than the number who were actually delivering an e-newsletter). In addition, the website of 26 Labour MPs promoted a Local eNews subscription form which promised that subscribers could occasionally receive information about their local area. However, this facility appears to have been created and managed by Labour's central office, not by the individual MP, and so has been ignored for the purposes of this research ⁽⁵⁾.

Exactly a year later, April 2004, the number of MPs offering visitors to their website an e-newsletter service had more than doubled to thirty nine. It is interesting to note that 5 MPs (three Labour, one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat), who were listed in April 2003 as providing an e-newsletter no longer did so in 2004. In addition, the number of Labour MPs who provided the Local eNews feature on their website increased to 50 ⁽⁶⁾. That 39 MPs claim to have an e-newsletter, does not mean that they all do: in fact only ten regularly sent out an e-newsletter ⁽⁷⁾. The content analysis of these e-newsletters took place from April 1st 2004 until March 31st 2005 ⁽⁸⁾.

There are few MPs with an e-newsletter, therefore, it is important to understand why more have not followed suit. Ten MPs interviewed considered providing an e-newsletter, but cited three main reasons why they have decided not to. First, at least two MPs were not sure that there would be demand for such an e-newsletter. Second, five MPs said they would like to

but felt that they did not have sufficient time or resources to manage one effectively. Third, three interviewees felt that even though people sign-up, email was often seen as junk mail, and therefore it could have a negative effect. It is interesting to note that none of these MPs was concerned that they would have anything to say: generating content was not an obstacle. The experience, good, indifferent or bad, of the pioneers is likely to influence the opinions of those who have so far decided against providing an e-newsletter.

6.4.2 How MPs manage their e-newsletter

There is no single blueprint for how MPs produce their e-newsletter: rather they are learning as they go along. Nick Palmer (Lab) tries to write weekly, and so identifies a number of local and national issues he thinks will be of interest. Robert Key (Cons) receives a daily campaign e-newsletter from party headquarters with an analysis of the news and forthcoming events. *“On a Friday, from five days worth of news I decide what I am going to put in my eNews.”* (Key 2005) Whereas Robert Newman, research assistant for Julie Morgan (Lab), takes a lot of the content from her website *“At the end of the month I look back at the diary and see what Julie has been doing.”* (Newman 2005). Common to these three approaches is an emphasis on explaining what they do (though this does not mean dialogue is discouraged), but Steve Webb (Lib Dems) takes a different approach and tends to ask questions of his subscribers (though he also puts his views on issues).

Table 6.4 outlines the approach of each MP to their e-newsletter. Quite clearly there is not a uniformity of approach. In particular, there are four broadly separate ‘fault lines’ which appear to differentiate the style of e-newsletters. First, whether the e-newsletter is solely aimed at constituents, as is the case with Steve Webb. The other MPs have made their e-newsletter available to non-constituents as well, and therefore seek to promulgate their views to a wider audience. Second, between those who tend to rely on links to press releases (see Appendix E), and those who write a discrete e-newsletter (see Appendix F). There is some cross-over between the two, for example, Nick Palmer does occasionally link to press releases, but MPs seem to favour one style or the other. Third, there is a divide between e-newsletters as part of a monologue or a dialogue. Those e-newsletters which are primarily based on press releases are the former, and those which are purposely written as a newsletter, generally the latter. Fourth, some e-newsletters are overtly partisan, and others are more neutral or non-political in tone. Broadly those e-newsletters based on press releases are more partisan, and those which are separately written newsletters are frequently less ‘political’. MPs are developing their own specific individual approaches to producing e-newsletters.

Although there are four ‘fault lines’, MPs appear to follow one of two paths in using their e-newsletter. First, as a partisan tool for gaining competitive advantage for either themselves, or their party. Second, a less overtly ‘political’ approach as a means of encouraging dialogue, and adding value to the representative system.

Table 6.4 Nature of MPs’ e-newsletters

| MP | Format |
|----------------|---|
| Peter Atkinson | A frontbencher. Only Conservative MP in the North East, e-newsletter may provide a service to Conservative supporters beyond his rural constituency. Refers to his e-newsletter as an E-news Bulletin. Normally aims for about 8 stories, which are specifically written in newsletter format. Primarily explains what he has done in the area on behalf of constituents. Provided 2 separate e-newsletters. Represents Hexham, the second largest geographical constituency in the UK. It is rural and the main population centre is the market town of Hexham. This seat has always returned a Conservative MP. |
| Tim Collins | Conservative Party frontbencher who was a target for the Liberal Democrats’ decapitation strategy (subsequently lost his seat in the 2005 General Election). Succinct and to the point, e-newsletter usually contains links to press releases on his website. Whilst clearly explaining what he is doing for his constituents, he seeks some feedback, and regularly promotes his ‘Week Ahead’. Provided 43 separate e-newsletters. Represents Westmoreland & Lonsdale. Rural seat in Cumbria based around the Lake District. |
| Paul Flynn | Labour backbencher, representing an urban South Wales seat, Newport West. Has been a winner of Parliamentary Website of the Year. He applies his chatty, humorous, magazine style to his e-newsletter. Started Newport e-news as this research project began. Therefore for the first 3 or 4 e-newsletters he was getting acquainted with the medium. Primarily one-way which covers topics of interest to Paul Flynn. Provided 12 separate e-newsletters. |
| Paul Holmes | Liberal Democrat representing Chesterfield, a fairly prosperous northern town. Primarily succinct and to the point, e-newsletter based on press releases from the website to which there are links. Occasionally makes political points about Liberal Democrat success nationally, “the only effective opposition”. Essentially promotes the work of both the MP locally, and his party nationally. Primarily one-way with little interaction. Provided 26 separate e-newsletters. |
| Norman Lamb | Liberal Democrat representing Norfolk North, a rural seat. Very succinct and to the point, essentially uses links to his website. Material is based on updates to the website. Frequently promotes his surgery details. One-way and very limited content. Provided 61 separate e-newsletters. |
| Mark Oaten | Liberal Democrat, Party Home Affairs spokesperson, representing Winchester, a wealthy southern town. The content was split between his portfolio and local issues. Succinct and to the point, based on links to his press releases on his website. One-way. Provided 35 separate e-newsletters. |
| Nick Palmer | Labour backbencher representing Broxtowe, a suburban Nottingham seat. Has a clear vision of the purpose of his e-newsletter. Created his e-newsletter in 1998, making him probably the first MP to have one. Although there are a lot of linkages to his website, there are also a lot of discrete pieces written for the e-newsletter. Clearly gives his e-newsletter a high priority as a communication channel, and uses it as a medium to explain his view on a range of local and national issues and policy matters. The tone is very chatty, occasionally humorous and often politically neutral. There is a sense that the MP is trying to create a virtual local community by encouraging interactivity. Provided 46 separate e-newsletters. |
| Steve Pound | Labour backbencher representing Ealing North a wealthy London seat. Short introductory paragraphs with links to more details on a story in his website. Also includes speeches, parliamentary questions and his local newspaper articles. Mostly one-way, but there is some feedback. Does include personal non-political stories. Provided 19 separate e-newsletters. |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Steve Webb | Liberal Democrat, spokesperson on Work and Pensions, representing Northavon, a suburban Bristol seat. Has a very clear vision of the purpose of his e-newsletter. Indeed, refers to it as an email consultation list, putting the emphasis on the fact that he consults with constituents (it is only available to constituents). Frequently asks a question on a policy issue and then later explains the feedback and what he will do as a result. Therefore, high level of interactivity. There is a sense of a conversation and an attempt to build a virtual community. The tone is generally non-partisan. Provided 12 separate e-newsletters. |
| Derek Wyatt | Labour, backbencher, representing Sittingbourne and Sheppey, an economically mixed area of mid-Kent, based around the town of Sittingbourne but with a rural hinterland. There is a mixture of wealth and rural deprivation within the constituency. Formed in 1997, and is still chair of, the All Party Internet Group. An Internet enthusiast, was voted in 2004 one of the top 100 Internet visionaries over the past decade. newsletter is in the form of a diary, lots of detail of who he met, and what he has done and what he will be doing. He also promotes his media activity. The stories are developed in the website. Provided six separate e-newsletters. |

6.4.3 Effect of an e-newsletter on an MP's workload

Although the amount of time an e-newsletter requires to be produced and managed is one of the barriers to its wider use, the interview respondents did not suggest that it was a particularly onerous task. Nick Palmer (Lab) probably spends the most amount of time, at 1-2 hours a day, but his e-newsletter has become a critical part of his work (Palmer 2005). Others, a lot less time, for example, Derek Wyatt spends *"About five minutes a day on it."* (Wyatt 2004) The time-consuming part of an e-newsletter is not gathering the content, rather it is managing the database.

What does affect my workload is the email list, which takes a lot of time to update.

For example, on the current ID cards issue it takes time to identify and then mail merge those constituents' email addresses which might be interested in this topic...the email database is a bit like the Firth of Forth bridge, once I have completed my work on the email list, it is time to start again." (Webb 2004)

An e-newsletter does occupy some of an MP's time, but once started it is a very manageable task.

6.5 Impact of Email on an MP's Roles

The interviews suggest that email has a fairly limited effect on how MPs conduct their roles. One MP, Anne Begg (Lab) implied that it helped promote her specialism *"Email is helpful as Secretary of an All-Party Parliamentary Group, so I can quickly let members know about meetings."* (Begg 2004) One MP also noted that it helped speed up the scrutinising process in that he can get a quicker response from Ministers, officials and local authorities (Loughton 2004). Email appears to have no real effect on the partisan role, but it does have more of an effect on the constituency role. Out of twenty two interviewees asked, sixteen noted that email enables constituents to contact them in a quicker and more informal way. This appears

to be having a qualitative effect on how some MPs interact with their constituency. As Tom Harris (Lib Dem) observed “*My predecessor found that physical surgeries were important, what has changed now is that people tend not to attend my surgeries in the constituency, rather they email instead.*” (Harris 2005) By making it easier for constituents to contact their MP, email may be encouraging citizen engagement (Della Carpini 2000).

6.6 Impact of E-newsletters on an MP's Roles

6.6.1 Specialism

E-newsletters are not yet a major tool in helping MPs publicise their role as a specialist. Table 6.5 shows that less than half, 47%, of all e-newsletters mention an MP's personal interests. Though it is worth noting that this feature is increasing, previously it was only a third of respondents (Jackson 2006b). This suggests that as MPs become more experienced in the use of e-newsletters, they are increasingly recognising its value for transferring information (Barnes 2001), and so controlling their processes of communication. Areas of specialism include sports, the Internet and education. There are clear differences in how much MPs stress the importance of this feature. Labour MPs seem more likely to promote their specialisms, with 91% of Nick Palmer's editions and 83% of Derek Wyatt's doing so. The Liberal Democrats seem the least likely to stress this feature, with for example only 16% of Norman Lamb's doing so. Whether MPs view their e-newsletters as either primarily a means of gaining competitive advantage, or essentially a non-political tool appears to have no impact on why they might promote their specialisms. Mentioning such activity appears to be another opportunity to explain what the MP is doing for their constituents, especially as several of the specialist topics, such as housing, transport and education, are linked directly to the needs of the local area.

6.6.2 Scrutiny

E-newsletters have become a tool in helping MPs promote their scrutinising role, with nearly two-thirds, 61%, using it for this purpose. This is a significant increase in one year, where the previous figure was 31% (Jackson 2006b). Such activity typically included describing meetings with Ministers, listing parliamentary questions tabled and committee membership activity. For example, Steve Webb (Lib Dem) outlined what he would do regarding the future funding of the BBC, Paul Flynn (Lab) outlined an Early Day Motion (EDM) he was tabling on the prohibition of Khat, and Tim Collins (Cons) released figures on how much council tax payers contributed to police funding. Those who view their e-newsletter as a means of encouraging dialogue are slightly more likely to focus on the scrutiny function,

than those looking only for a competitive advantage. This might be because the latter consider it has less value in trying to raise their profile amongst constituents. There is very little difference between whether Labour, 60%, or opposition MPs, 63%, promote their scrutiny function. In the previous study (Jackson 2006b), only 14% of Labour MPs' e-newsletters promoted their scrutinising role. That there is parity suggests that promoting their scrutinising role need not be just about criticising government. Rather, the use of Parliamentary Questions, the signing of EDMs and promoting new legislation can seek to improve decisions, and not just indicate the existence of 'yah-boo sucks' politics.

As with the findings on MPs' use of websites (see 5.3.2) there is also a sense that an MP's e-newsletter does not just help them scrutinise the executive. MPs also seem to recognise that providing the e-newsletter helps constituents scrutinise their activities. For example, Nick Palmer (Lab) noted

I'm aware that on any given subject the list is likely to have people who understand it more than I do, so I often benefit from clarifications and additional thoughts from them. For example, I wrote a bit carelessly about new EU rules restricting battery cages for hens, and was corrected by a battery cage inspector who knew about the detailed regulations better. (Palmer 2005)

MPs who use a website or e-newsletter to support their scrutinising role, are also intrinsically using these communication channels as a further means of highlighting constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006).

6.6.3 Partisan

A minority of e-newsletters fulfil the partisan role. Over a third of all e-newsletters actively promoted party policy, for Labour MPs this meant defending or explaining government policy. For example, Paul Flynn encouraged readers to be aware of the details of the Child Trust Fund, and Steve Pound explained that the Government was putting more police on the streets. Opposition MPs either criticised the Government, as Peter Atkinson (Cons) did on a number of rural issues, or they promoted their party's policies, as Mark Oaten (Lib Dem) did on a range of Home Affairs issues, such as restructuring the working day of prisoners. The most likely partisan function MPs use their e-newsletter for is to promote their party's activities. The single highest feature was the 84% of e-newsletters which promoted the MP's local activity. For example, Tim Collins (Cons) invited residents in Sedbergh to 'join him for a cuppa', and Norman Lamb regularly promoted local Liberal Democrat events. Over a third of e-newsletters mentioned national party activity such as party conferences, and

Labour MPs combined the national initiative, the Big Conversation, with local events to support the consultation process. MPs appear to have given greater value to promoting their party's (or their own) local activities through their e-newsletter. A year before only 11% promoted their local party activity (Jackson 2006b), but this has been the single largest increase of 73%. As their experience of the medium has grown, MPs appear to have concluded that an e-newsletter is an effective means of promoting themselves and their local party.

Whilst most MPs promote their party's national activities, they normally interpret this in their own way. Only 8% of e-newsletters appear to contain content provided by the national party. For example, Steve Pound included Tony Blair's speech on the referendum for the European Constitution. However, on the whole the content of MPs' e-newsletters is largely chosen and written by them, and not their party headquarters. This suggests that e-newsletters by helping MPs bypass their party as a source of information, may be enhancing the individualist model of representation (Stokes and Miller 1963).

Although MPs are using their e-newsletters as part of their partisan role, they do not appear to be fully utilising them for this purpose. They are not being used to mobilise support, with only 2% of e-newsletters encouraging subscribers to support or join the party, for example, Derek Wyatt encourages people to attend a local party dinner. Despite the fact that three parliamentary by-elections ⁽⁹⁾ and local council elections occurred during the fieldwork period, only 13% of e-newsletters promote party election campaigns. Although this is a low figure, it is up from 2% a year before (Jackson 2006b). This might reflect a small growth in the recognition of how an e-newsletter might mobilise support.

6.6.4 Constituency role

The most popular feature of MPs' e-newsletters, 76%, is that they speak for the constituency. This is effectively a political point that the MP is acting on behalf of the whole constituency. For example, Steve Pound (Lab) explained how he acted as a bus conductor ⁽¹⁰⁾ for the opening of a new 700 home development which allowed him to emphasise his constituency's housing needs. Norman Lamb (Lib Dem) criticised the orthopaedic surgery waiting lists in his constituency, and Tim Collins (Cons) criticised the fact that Cumbria police faced capping to their funding. Other examples of the constituency role include transport problems, campaigning to save local amenities and problems with large local employers.

This feature appears to be becoming more important, given that a year before the response was 58% (Jackson 2006b).

One significant, but unexplained, change was the decline in the 'information portal' role. A year before, this had been identified as a major feature of e-newsletters, which provided details of local information and local community services, such as events and where people can volunteer to get involved in local community activities (Jackson 2006b). The MP, therefore, sought to promote themselves as a key member of the community who encouraged civic participation. However, these responses have decreased, from 59% providing local information to 19%. For example, Nick Palmer (Lab) outlined the local effect of a 10 year plan announced by Network Rail, and Steve Pound (Lab) provided full details of local sports activities for under-16s. Therefore, although there has been a reduction in the number of e-newsletters acting as an 'information portal', it is nonetheless one which adds value that few MPs' offline communication provides.

There is very limited evidence of two-way dialogue in e-newsletters. The most popular means, 28%, of incorporating such input is to mention, either by name or generally, the activities of constituents, indeed this feature is up from 17% (Jackson 2006b). For example, Steve Pound mentions a constituent of Grenadian descent who was seeking to get help to Grenada following the devastation of Hurricane Ivan. Mark Oaten (Lib Dem) responded to a petition given to him about the withdrawal of a local bus route. MPs are poor at using their e-newsletters to generate feedback on issues of interest to constituents. Only 6% of e-newsletters ask for the view of constituents on specific national or local issues, and this figure is skewed slightly by the fact that Steve Webb's (Lib Dem) prime purpose is to encourage feedback on a range of issues. Tim Collins (Cons) conducted online referenda on constituents' views about drugs policy locally. The MP's whose e-newsletter seeks to encourage dialogue, are more likely to use it as a sounding board.

Although the content analysis of the e-newsletters does not necessarily stress the constituency role over the other three, the interviews strongly suggest that the constituency role is the most important. For example, James Cook, research assistant to Peter Atkinson (Cons) said "*The main purpose of the e-newsletter is to reinforce the point that Peter is working hard on behalf of the constituency.*" (Cook 2004) Nick Palmer (Lab) saw his e-newsletter as an efficient means of reaching constituents "*It seemed to me that it would get round the problem that writing to hundreds of constituents is very costly in time and money.*"

(Palmer 2005). An e-newsletter is a time-efficient means of promoting what an MP is doing on behalf of constituents, and so supporting the constituency service model (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006).

Table 6.5 How an e-newsletter helps an MP fulfil their roles?

| Category | Percentage of MPs' e-newsletters meeting this criteria |
|--|--|
| 1) Promotes Specialism Mentions areas of personal interest/expertise | 124 (47%) |
| 2) Executive Scrutiny Promotes their parliamentary scrutinising role | 161 (61%) |
| 3) Partisan role Promotes party policy Promotes local party activity Promotes national party activity Encourages party membership/support Promotes party election campaigns Uses content provided by national party | 93 (35%) 220 (84%) 93 (35%) 5 (2%) 33 (13%) 22 (8%) |
| 4) Constituency role Refers to individual casework/constituents Speaks for constituency Seeks views on local issues Seeks views on national issues Provides local information Provides local community activities | 74 (28%) 198 (76%) 16 (6%) 15 (6%) 50 (19%) 19 (7%) |

6.7 How MPs Communicate to Constituents Via Their E-newsletter

6.7.1 E-newsletter communication features

Analysis will focus on the six most popular features found in all e-newsletters (see table 6.6).

The single most popular feature, promoting their website, strongly suggests that MPs see a clear link between the two channels. Indeed, only one MP, Steve Webb (Lib Dem) is unlikely to promote his website with just 18 per cent of his emails doing so. However, it is quite clear why this is the case, *"I am careful not to use the Internet as a crude partisan propaganda tool...I see it (his email consultation list) as a long-term relationship building exercise."* (Webb 2004) He presumably does not view his website as an effective means of achieving this. MPs used slightly different approaches to promoting their website, which seemed to reflect their individual style. Those who had a separate *'How to contact me?'* section in their e-newsletter (Peter Atkinson, Derek Wyatt, Paul Flynn, Nick Palmer) were more likely to have a newsletter format with a number of discrete articles. Those who had a link to their website, tended to be those whose e-newsletter was primarily based on press

releases from their website (Mark Oaten, Paul Holmes, Steve Pound, Tim Collins, Norman Lamb).

Three of the remaining top five features are clearly designed to promote what an MP is doing for their constituents. Only one, their contact details, appears to overtly encourage any communication from subscribers. E-newsletters are clearly used to promote an MP's campaigns. At 75% this is only slightly lower than the 80% on websites as highlighted in table 5.9. Promoting campaigns takes a wide form, for example, Tim Collins (Cons) promotes both national campaigns as a Party spokesperson, and local ones such as saving rural schools in his constituency. As sources of uncontrolled information, e-newsletters are used to influence constituents' views on issues and policies.

Promoting press releases via an e-newsletter is, at 55%, quite considerably less popular than with websites where 79% promote their press releases (see table 5.9). This is in part explained by the fact that some MPs, such as Mark Oaten (Lib Dem) base their e-newsletters on links to their press releases, whilst others such as Nick Palmer (Lab) provide an e-newsletter based more on discrete articles. However, the influence of press releases is still to be found even on the more bespoke e-newsletters. Three of the interview respondents (James Cook, David Liddington, Robert Newman) specifically pointed out that their website and press releases were the sources of their e-newsletter articles. In addition, Andrew May, research assistant to Annette Brooke (Lib Dem), outlined preliminary work they were doing on sending press releases by email to targeted groups of constituents. E-newsletters, like websites, are another means of bypassing the media.

E-newsletters are significantly less likely to provide contact details than websites, at 42% as opposed to 95%. This difference is fairly logical in that a website may be the first time a constituent has visited an MP's online presence. Whereas once they have subscribed to the e-newsletter they are likely to be aware of the MP's offline and online contact details, otherwise how could they have subscribed in the first place? However, the difference between the use of contact details in websites and e-newsletters may also reflect their purpose. A website, like a leaflet, could be a first point of contact, whereas an e-newsletter is more likely to be designed to help build relationships with constituents who have already sought some information about, or contact with, their MP.

One feature which e-newsletters are more likely to promote is an MP's events calendar. Only 9% of websites provide this function, as opposed to 28% of e-newsletters. Events promoted included surgery details, local party functions, personal appearances in the constituency and their diary for the week ahead. For example, Nick Palmer (Lab) promoted a Fair Trade coffee morning he would be attending in the constituency, which had the benefit of linking him to a political issue as well as explaining his attendance at a local event. Not all events necessarily promoted the MP, for example, Paul Flynn carried an advert promoting the Institute of Welsh Affairs Dinner. The events calendar can be used both to raise the MP's profile, add value by promoting other organisations and encourage local participation.

Table 6.6 Use of MPs' e-newsletters as part of an integrated communications approach

| Feature | Percentage of MPs' e-newsletters meeting each criterion |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| (1) Promotes website | 239 (91%) |
| (2) Promotes campaigns | 198 (76%) |
| (3) Press releases | 145 (55%) |
| (4) Contact details | 110 (42%) |
| (5) Events calendar | 67 (26%) |
| (6) Promotes speeches given | 60 (23%) |
| (7) Promotes public meetings | 46 (18%) |
| (8) Surgery details | 38 (15%) |
| (9) Promotes media coverage secured | 32 (12%) |
| (10) Email contact form provided | 4 (2%) |
| (11) Printed newsletters | 3 (1%) |
| (11) Asks for volunteers | 3 (1%) |
| (13) Email surgery | 1 (0.3%) |
| (13) Leaflets/posters | 1 (0.3%) |
| (13) Promotes local membership | 1 (0.3%) |
| (13) Fundraising | 1 (0.3%) |
| (17) SMS text messaging | 0 |
| (17) Weblog | 0 |

6.7.2 Is an e-newsletter part of an integrated communication approach?

Although the numbers are far smaller, and therefore making a direct comparison is difficult, MPs seem more likely to use an e-newsletter than a website to promote their other communication channels. Not one of the ten e-newsletters was judged to be unintegrated,

whereas seven ⁽¹¹⁾ are semi-integrated suggesting a wider use of an e-newsletter. Three e-newsletters link with a wider range of communication channels and are integrated ⁽¹²⁾. As table 6.7 shows, nine features, in particular, are likely to be used in MPs' e-newsletters.

The interviews with MPs support the view that they are aware of the value of e-newsletters at getting their message to constituents directly, and thereby bypassing the media. For example, Nick Palmer (Lab) believed that

It would get round the problem that writing to hundreds of constituents is very costly in time and money, and we'd always end up writing days after they'd read a slanted account in the press. This way I can get my view of the issue before them at the same time as the *Daily Mail* account. (Palmer 2005).

The point that consistently underpinned the interviews was that an e-newsletter encouraged direct communication, some utilised this for competitive advantage and others as part of a model of e-representation. Taking Palmer's basic point, Derek Wyatt (Lab) added

I wanted to make my communication more personal. Many politicians do not talk to people between elections, but the e-newsletter allows me to communicate with them. I can speak to a thousand people each month, and get feedback from them. (Wyatt 2004)

E-newsletters are not just another communication channel, for some MPs they are altering their relationship with constituents.

6.8 Are MPs Following E-newsletter Best Practice?

6.8.1 Structure

It is clear from table 6.7 that the ten e-newsletters meet the structural requirements of the Best Practice model, even more so than MPs' websites (see table 5.4). Indeed, in a year, the responses to this category have increased significantly, with the lowest percentage now being greater than the highest a year before (Jackson 2006b). The reason why brevity (short and to the point) has the lowest response, 87%, is due to the nature of two MPs e-newsletters. Paul Flynn takes a very magazine approach to his e-newsletter, with articles and the relevant sections of a number of parliamentary debates. None of Paul Flynn's e-newsletters are considered short and to the point, but this is not necessarily a weakness, some constituents may well want to know in detail what their MP is doing for them. Similarly, just under half, 48%, of Nick Palmer's e-newsletters are not considered short and to the point. This is usually because he provides a detailed brief on an upcoming issue, for example, the four page content of one edition of his e-newsletter was taken up with explaining immigration policy.

Although lengthy, it is likely that a briefing approach on a current policy issue will be of interest to many subscribers. The Government backbench MPs are slightly more likely to explain their position in greater depth than opposition MPs. However, overall the ten MPs have grasped what, structurally, makes a good e-newsletter.

6.8.2 Content

Given that subscribers opt into subscription to each MP's e-newsletter, the assumption is that the content is likely to be of interest to them, and continued subscription reinforces this.

What e-newsletters seem to provide is topical content. Given the ease and speed with which an MP can put out an e-newsletter, they covered a number of high profile current issues such as ID cards, Iraq, immigration, the Budget and general economic policy. At present MPs are slightly more likely to include national policy content, 63%, than local content, 55%, though there are variations between MPs. For example, 84% of Steve Pound's e-newsletter contains national policy, as opposed to 31% of Norman Lamb's. A fairly common tactic is to link a national story to the constituency, for example, Peter Atkinson (Cons) linked a discussion on postal services with specific problems in Tynedale.

6.8.3 Campaigning tool

The effectiveness of an e-newsletter is based not only on the content, but also how that content is used. As a regular communication outwith of an election period, an e-newsletter offers potential to mobilise support. Table 6.7 shows that whilst MPs have begun to grasp the campaigning capabilities of their e-newsletter, they are under-utilising them. An e-newsletter may be used to support local campaigns such as opposing a hospital closure, but they are far less likely to be used to build up party campaigning capacities. The reason for this is probably best explained by Derek Wyatt (Lab) who stated "*I regard the e-newsletter as a service, rather than a campaign tool.*" Wyatt (2004) The campaigning features with the highest response rates are those which are more interactive, therefore, those MPs who are more likely to view their e-newsletter as a means of gaining an advantage, are actually less likely to utilise it as a campaigning tool. Those MPs who seek to develop relationships through interactivity are likely to be more professional in choosing appropriate communication channels.

E-newsletters are not a static communication channel designed just to provide information. The evidence is that they certainly do this, such as explaining MPs different views of key policy issues or explaining their party's policies. However, e-newsletters are also potentially

an effective persuasion and relationship building tool (Barnes 2001, Kraut *et al.* 2003, Jackson 2006c). Only a third of all e-newsletters asked the subscriber to do something as a result of receiving it. This overall figure masks considerable differences in approach, with none of Mark Oaten's e-newsletters asking the subscriber to do anything with it, whereas all of Peter Atkinson's do. The type of activities subscribers were asked to undertake included: vote for Ken Livingstone in the London Mayoral elections, respond to a local government consultation document, visit a website, attend a dinner, consider an issue in a different light, complete an opinion poll, watch a television programme, attend a public meeting and one encouraged women to attend breast screening regularly. The 'ask' could be very political and campaign oriented, or merely for subscribers to access non-political information. MPs who viewed their e-newsletter as a means of encouraging dialogue and e-representation are more likely to ask the subscriber to become active. Therefore, a mutual relationship may be formed around a communication medium.

MPs do not use their e-newsletter as a means of building up their organisational base, with only Nick Palmer seeking volunteers, and none seeking new members. Although approximately half of all e-newsletters promote campaigns, only 7% seek to actually mobilise subscribers around such campaigns, which appears to be a missed opportunity. Only seven e-newsletters ⁽¹⁴⁾ seek at any point to mobilise support for campaigns. The most frequent is Steve Webb, 27%, who for instance seeks to generate support for his Health Care Trust campaign and to oppose the downgrading of Frenchay Hospital. Other 'political' examples are when Norman Lamb targeted voters in a particular ward. MPs also use their e-newsletters for non-political purposes, for example, Tim Collins encourages constituents to join the Macmillan Cancer Relief's World's Biggest Coffee Morning. So far MPs are only experimenting with the mobilising potential of e-newsletters, but some are also utilising the 'information portal' role.

6.8.4 Two-way Communication

MPs are not using their e-newsletter as a two-way communication tool. Table 6.7 shows that only 13% of all e-newsletters seek any feedback in the form of online referenda, views on what subscribers would like to see in the e-newsletter and subscribers' views on a range of policies. These figures are slightly skewed by the fact that only five (out of the ten) e-newsletters ask for any form of feedback. Tim Collins (Cons) frequently has a link to his '*E-village Hall*' if visitors "Want to get something off your chest". Steve Webb (Lib Dem) is especially likely to consult with subscribers on policy issues such as how the BBC should be

financed, their views on ID cards and education policy. That two-third of all e-newsletters have a low level of interactivity supports the view that they are not used to develop a dialogue. Three MPs, Steve Webb (64%), Nick Palmer (28%) and Tim Collins (27%), seem most likely to use their e-newsletter to encourage a conversation with constituents. These three MPs are the only ones using two-way symmetrical communication. For example, Steve Webb gives the results of the surveys and what his personal policy position will be, and Nick Palmer apologised for getting details about Belmarsh detainees wrong, after a constituent corrected him. For most MPs, those who view it as a means of generating competitive advantage, an e-newsletter is augmentory in enhancing their ability to get across their message through monologue. However, for a small minority, those who seek symmetrical communication, e-newsletters open up transformative change by encouraging e-representation.

Although the number of e-newsletters which seek to encourage dialogue is limited, the impact on those MPs that do may be disproportionate to their use. For example, Steve Webb explained the benefits of such dialogue,

I ask questions on subjects I do not have a feel for, such as GM crops, nuclear power stations or ID cards. Although I do not always get the answer I suspect I will, it does provide me with an insight. It does not turn me into a robot, automatically following their views, but it can provide me with information, especially if I ask a question where my Party does not have a clear view, or it is an issue I have limited knowledge of. (Webb 2004)

Encouraging a conversation could provide 'grass roots' intelligence which strengthens an MP's position. A model of e-representation may provide personal benefits for those MPs who champion it.

Table 6.7 Are MPs meeting Best Practice in using a e-newsletter

| Feature | Percentage of MPs e-newsletters meeting this criteria |
|---|---|
| 1) Structure Short & to the point Links to the website Easy to unsubscribe Provides Summaries Regular | 227 (87%) 256 (98%) 255 (97%) 247 (94%) 261 (100%) |
| 2) Policy content National Local | 165 (63%) 145 (55%) |
| 3) Campaigning tool Asks the visitor to do something Seeks donations Promotes local campaigns Promotes national campaigns Seeks volunteers Seeks membership Seeks to mobilise support | 86 (33%) 0 126 (48%) 149 (57%) 3 (1%) 0 19 (7%) |
| 4) Two-way communication Seeks feedback Two-way asymmetrical communication Two-way symmetrical communication Level of interactivity with visitor/subscriber | 34 (13%) 21 (8%) 29 (11%) Low: 177 (67%) Medium: 47 (18%) High: 42 (16%) |

Table 6.8 suggests that only one MP, Peter Atkinson meets the expert level of the Best Practice model, with seven considered mediocre ⁽¹³⁾ and Norman Lamb and Paul Flynn inexpert. This would suggest that Peter Atkinson, and possibly Tim Collins, are the only MPs who are pioneering the use of an e-newsletter which is not necessarily an accurate reflection. Peter Atkinson provides the fewest number of e-newsletters, and Paul Flynn had just started his. The model requires triangulating with the interview data. From this it is clear that Nick Palmer and Steve Webb, and possibly Steve Pound and Paul Flynn have a particular visionary model driving their use of an e-newsletter which also makes them pioneers. Those who are making best use of their e-newsletter appear to have a clear vision, the others may just be influenced by the bandwagon effect or any benefits are personal and not to the wider representative system.

Table 6.8 Which MPs' e-newsletters meet the Best Practice model?

| MP | Best Practice model score |
|----------------|--|
| Peter Atkinson | Structure 10 Policy Content 10 Campaigning 3 Two-way communication 3 Total: 26 |
| Tim Collins | Structure 10 Policy content 8 Campaigning 3 Two-way communication 2 Total:23 |
| Paul Flynn | Structure 9 Policy 7 Campaigning 3 Two-way communication 2 Total:21 |
| Paul Holmes | Structure 10 Policy content 6 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 0 Total: 17 |
| Norman Lamb | Structure 10 Policy content 2 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 0 Total:13 |
| Mark Oaten | Structure 10 Policy content 5 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 0 Total: 16 |
| Nick Palmer | Structure 9 Policy content 7 Campaigning 3 Two-way communication 2 Total: 21 |
| Steve Pound | Structure 10 Policy content 7 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 0 Total: 18 |
| Steve Webb | Structure 10 Policy content 4 Campaigning 2 Two-way communication 5 Total: 21 |
| Derek Wyatt | Structure 7 Policy content 8 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 0 Total: 15 |

6.9 Summary

Unlike for most other workers (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005), email has increased MPs' workloads, and potentially threatens to do so even more. This means that

MPs are in line with that section of ‘power emailers’ (Fallows 2002) for whom email has increased their workload. However, it has also encouraged greater constituent participation by making it easier for those from groups who previously have been less likely, to actually contact their MP for the first time. MPs’ e-newsletters are being used to support all four of the roles tested, with promoting scrutiny the most popular. This is a change from a year previous when the constituency role was dominant (Jackson 2006b). This could be the result of the fact that the two content analyses were not testing exactly the same MPs (though four were in both), or that the scrutiny role is becoming more important. It could also be, as there is with MPs’ use of websites, a link between the scrutiny and constituency roles: MPs’ constituency activity is one of the ways by which a constituent can scrutinise them. It is worth noting that Jackson (2006b) found that only two of the roles secured a significant level of presence, whereas now all four roles have a significant level of presence. Most MPs’ e-newsletters are primarily used to transfer information more efficiently and effectively, but there are a few pioneering MPs with a vision for how they will use their e-newsletter to enhance representation. For these MPs’ an e-newsletter helps develop closer relationships with constituents, through interpersonal communication (Barnes 2001).

Footnotes

- (1) Although with a smaller sample, the pilot study (Jackson 2006b) provided a context.
- (2) Candy Atherton, Kerry Pollard, Chris Saunders (research assistant to Vincent Cable).
- (3) Anne Begg, Chris Saunders (research assistant to Vincent Cable), Jane Griffiths, Lembit Opik, Andrew Bennett, Tim Loughton, Graham Leadbetter (research assistant for Angus Robertson), Frank Field, Jim Fitzpatrick, Chris Mole.
- (4) Only one MP, Andrew Bennett (Labour) did not think that email had increased his workload
- (5) Indeed, I registered with each of these 26 eNews, and only one ever gave any form of response, and that only once. This strongly suggested either multiple registrations were ignored as not from constituents, or none of these 26 MPs actually provided a regular e-newsletter.
- (6) I tried to register with all 50 of those with eNews, with the same disappointing result as above.
- (7) One of the ten (Steve Webb’s) was sent to only constituents, and I made specific arrangements with him to receive it for my research purposes. The ten were: Peter Atkinson (Cons), Tim Collins (Cons), Paul Holmes (Lib Dem), Norman Lamb (Lib Dem), Mark Oaten (Lib Dem), Nick Palmer (Lab), Steve Pound (Lab), Steve Webb (Lib Dem), Derek Wyatt (Lab).
- (8) During this year, anecdotally a number of MPs appeared to send out a regular e-newsletter for the first time. Obviously these were not studied as part of the content analysis, though it does suggest that in the run-up to the 2005 General Election more MPs considered using this communication channel. Indeed, for a separate research project, I interviewed Sheridan Westlake who was responsible for the Conservative Party’s central e-campaigning, and he suggested that the party had a strategy of encouraging Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs) to have an e-newsletter in target seats. Similarly, when I

spoke to the Liberal Democrats Internet group of activists in October 2004, it was clear that email lists were the main focus of their interest.

(9) Pound had indeed been a bus conductor prior to becoming an MP.

(10) Leicester South, Birmingham Hodge Hill, Hartlepool.

(11) Peter Atkinson, Paul Flynn, Paul Holmes, Norman Lamb, Mark Oaten, Steve Pound, Steve Webb.

(12) Tim Collins, Nick Palmer, Derek Wyatt.

(13) Tim Collins, Paul Holmes, Mark Oaten, Nick Palmer, Steve Pound, Steve Webb and Derek Wyatt.

CHAPTER 7

MPs AND THE BLOGOSPHERE

7.1 Introduction

Weblogs have become a social phenomenon, which some political actors have sought to use as a communication tool. The blogosphere is the latest challenge to the dominance of the mass media on political communication. It has introduced a body of communicators, bloggers, whose equivalent does not exist offline. The practice and study of the political blogosphere has been dominated by the U.S. The UK's political blogosphere is much smaller, at an earlier stage in its development and has been subject to fewer research projects. Ferguson and Howell (2005) used panels to identify what they thought of a range of political blogs. Jackson (2006d) assessed how political parties have used their weblogs. Auty (2005) provided exploratory data on elected representatives' weblogs which provides a useful starting point and Coleman (2005) has created a conceptual framework of direct representation. Such research has started to address the use of blogs by elected representatives, and the theoretical concepts underpinning it.

7.2 What are Weblogs?

7.2.1 Defining a weblog

Weblogs are structurally different from websites, they can be viewed as *"A web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources."* (Drezner and Farrell, 2004 p5) A weblog is a published real-time online diary. There are two types of weblog, those that emphasise the diary and comment aspect, and those that emphasise hyperlinks (Blood 2000b). The former allow a blogger to promote their ideas, whereas the latter act as a filter, looking at what exists on the World Wide Web that might be of interest to visitors (Blood 2000b). It is possible, however, that a weblog could contain both personal views and links to other interested weblogs. Weblogs are very diverse in that there is no one dominant style or activity (Nardi *et al.* 2004), but common to all is that they share information (Dyrud and Worley 2005, Quible 2005). If bloggers make mistakes in the information they publish, they rely on their peers to point out any errors (Johnson and Kaye 2004). If individuals can freely access information, this should enable them to challenge the monopoly on information of existing hierarchies (Dyrud and Worley 2005).

7.2.2 The history of blogs

With the first weblog published in 1996 (Kumar *et al.* 2005), there were estimated to be only a 'handful' in 1998 (Blood 2000) and two dozen in 1999 (Kennedy 2004). Up until 1999 weblogs could only be provided by those who had web design skills, (Blood 2000b, Kennedy 2004, Drezner and Farrell 2004, Kumar *et al.* 2005). The key factor that encouraged their growth was the availability from 1999 of easy to use software (Blood 2000b). By 2004 the number of blogs worldwide had increased dramatically to 4.2 million (Rosenbloom 2004). Producing a weblog became much easier than creating a website, so that even technophobes could get online. In addition, the nature of weblogs began to fundamentally change, from being essentially link-driven to becoming more conversational (Blood 2000b). The blogosphere started as an underground movement, but now members of the 'establishment' have joined the bandwagon.

7.2.3 The political value of blogs

The blogosphere as a horizontal form of communication supports conversations (Reynolds 2003, Baker and Green 2005). The majority of weblogs encourage feedback from visitors, who become active participants in the sharing of knowledge and ideas (Kennedy 2004, Flatley 2005). As a result, weblogs have been considered a good way of circulating new ideas (Baker and Green 2005). It is perhaps for these reasons that a survey of 3,747 web users found that weblogs were viewed as a credible source which provided depth and thoughtful analysis (Johnson and Kaye 2004). This might suggest that outwith of an election a weblog might be an effective mechanism for an MP to promote their ideas.

Weblogs, according to Sunstein (2004), act as a personal echo chamber by filtering out unwanted noise. The blogger can voice and explain their own ideas and opinions on issues. For visitors such blogs provide an alternative to the traditional media to check stories (Glaser 2003). Cumulatively, through such echo chambers, ideas can be shared and commented upon (Glaser 2003). It is this idea-sharing feature of weblogs which underpins the interest in the impact of a blog on the concept of representation. An MP can explain and discuss their ideas with constituents (and others), but at the same time their audience can introduce ideas they hope the MP will adopt. Weblogs can, therefore, create the open conversational atmosphere of the coffee house, pub or private meeting where ideas can be introduced, considered and possibly adopted.

It would be erroneous, however, to view the blogosphere as a democratic or utopian ideal.

Not all weblogs are equal in their influence, for within any community only a few blogs attract a large readership (Drezner and Farrell 2004, Wagner and Bollaju 2005). The vast majority of blogs are probably only read by family and friends, while there are only a few elite blogs read by comparably large numbers. In terms of providing an alternative to the traditional media for sharing ideas we are looking at a relatively small number of blogs in any one field of interest. MPs, therefore, are competing to dominate in their narrow sphere of blog interest.

7.2.4 The impact of weblogs

The impact of political blogs is not so much who is producing them, rather it is whether they attract influential visitors. A high percentage of visitors to political blogs in the U.S. are political reporters, politicians and policy makers (Bloom 2003): in other words, key opinion formers. This can give political bloggers a disproportionate influence, based on the type of blog visitor, and not just the number of blog visitors. Therefore, elite bloggers can act as a 'focal point' (Drezner and Farrell 2004) encouraging influential visitors to congregate around them. To influence the news, political and policy agenda, political actors need to attract an 'A' list audience to their weblog.

Weblogs do not just have an impact because of their ability to occasionally set the news agenda. Bloggers by their nature are 'techno-activists' (Kahn and Kellner 2004), so their community is often 'political' in nature, this opens up the possibility of mobilising them. Johnson and Kaye (2004) believed that Howard Dean, a 'tech-savvy' politician was able to 'woo' this constituency. More generally, it is argued that because of the success in using weblogs to raise funds and mobilise grassroots support, they 'came of age' during the 2004 Presidential election (Kumar *et al.* 2005). Weblogs enable political actors to communicate at two different levels at the same time. First, they can narrowcast to a very small number of key opinion formers to influence the political agenda. Second, they can broadcast to as many people as possible to try and influence their individual opinions. Potentially, MPs can reach a range of citizens who visit the blogosphere.

7.3 MPs With a Weblog

7.3.1 Why MPs have a weblog

By the time parliament was prorogued for the 2005 General Election, seven MPs had a weblog, which meant that 651 did not. Therefore, when trying to identify what motivated MPs to have a weblog we are talking about a very small and select group. Whilst these seven

may turn out to be innovators, the sample is too small for diffusion theory to apply yet. Nor does the drive to gain new skills to provide a competitive advantage as part of increased professionalism (Negrine 2007) help explain MPs' use of weblogs. It is very likely, therefore, that individual factors influenced why each decided to set up a blog ⁽¹⁾. Several of the blogging MPs indicate in their first blogs why they had created one.

The widely accepted innovator of MPs' blogs is Tom Watson, whose press release announcing his blog stated that it was a New Year's resolution to spend half an hour a day on the Internet. His first blog of March 6th 2003 was very low key and stated:

This is the first entry in the new home of Tom Watson (Lab). There's not much to see here right now, as all previous activity has been at tom@westbrom.com. We're going to be busy for a while designing the new site (I have a strange feeling that the display width will be one of the higher priorities) and importing the archives from the old site, but if you want you can sit back and watch the whole thing come together. Pretty cool, huh?"

This suggests that he felt he was beginning a journey, and probably one he did not necessarily know the final destination of. Moreover, his language style implies that, as one of the younger MPs, he expected his audience to also be fairly young.

The next MP to launch a blog was Richard Allan (Lib Dem) who also had his own personal reasons, *"My primary motive for creating a weblog was a technical curiosity. I am a technical person and a technically minded MP. I picked up that weblogging was going on and I thought that I had to try it."* (Allan 2006). This suggests that the first two MPs to set up a weblog were experimenting. Yet, within a short span of time, a blog became a core part of how they both communicated to the wider public.

Of the next tranche of pioneers, the fact that a weblog might be an effective means of getting across their messages appears to be the main factor. For example, Austin Mitchell (Lab) noted *"I saw both the blog and the website as a safety valve for people to read what I had to say."* (Mitchell 2006). Mitchell's weblog is therefore clearly set up as another avenue to get across his views, and hence a one-way communication channel. Mitchell's view is influenced by the fact that as a backbench MP he has limited ability to get across his views in the traditional print or broadcast media (Mitchell 2006). Clive Soley (Lab), in part agrees, and wrote in his weblog *"The idea immediately appealed to me as it was an additional way of talking to the public without the media in the middle."* ⁽²⁾ However, in our interview Soley

was keen to stress bypassing the media was a bonus and was not his main reason for having a blog (Soley 2006), a fact borne out by the highly interactive nature of his blog.

One MP, Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem), appeared to have come to the decision to have a weblog in a slightly different way. As she noted in her first post on 29th September 2004 she had been the subject of a ‘proxy’ blog ⁽³⁾. Clearly, therefore, there was an element of considering a blog as a result of what Gidley refers to in her first post as ‘stalking’. However, having made the decision, Gidley identifies in this post two things that she wants to achieve. *“First, give a bit of insight into all those local things an MP does but does not necessarily press release or put on the website. Second, a female’s perspective of Parliament.”*

For each of these five MPs there appears to be a different personal reason why they created a weblog, but our typology may provide some insight. The first two MPs are influenced by resources, time for Watson and the development of skills by Allan. The other three MPs seem more influenced by activities, in particular control. Both Mitchell and Soley wished to have greater control on their messages, and Gidley to take control of her site away from ‘proxy bloggers’.

There is no sense that MPs with a weblog had a particular profile. Whilst the Liberal Democrats, with two of the seven might be slightly over-represented, the sample is too small to suggest that party is a factor. Two of the bloggers, Austin Mitchell and Boris Johnson, were fairly well known. All were backbenchers, though two, Tom Watson and Boris Johnson later joined their respective frontbenches. Only one, Sandra Gidley, was in a marginal, while the rest represented safe seats, which might suggest that a weblog was not viewed as a vote-winning tool. Two MPs, Richard Allan and Clive Soley ⁽⁴⁾, were standing down at the 2005 General Election, suggesting that their interest was in the medium *per se*, and not necessarily what it did for them as MPs. Women are slightly underrepresented with only one blogger. Overall the seven represent a fairly eclectic group, most of whom share only an interest in using new technology.

7.3.2 Why MPs do not have a weblog?

Twenty of those interviewed were asked whether they had considered having a weblog, and if so why they decided not to. Eighteen had definitely considered having one, but decided against. The most popular reason, with ten respondents, was the pressures of time. For example, Lembit Opik (Lib Dem) noted that a weblog was *“A lot like smoking - once you*

have started you cannot stop.” (Opik 2004) The remaining reasons imply a concern about lose of control. Five interviewees were concerned that a weblog could be dangerous, for example, two made specific reference to the problems the Liberal Democrat candidate at the Hartlepool by-election suffered ⁽⁵⁾, and one Labour MP was concerned that *“It is a daily diary which can take over the job rather than actually trying to help constituents and develop policy. I can see that with a weblog you can get locked into it.”* Three MPs were concerned that it could be abused, and potentially taken over by opponents. For example, Paul Flynn (Lab) suggested that *“The danger with a blog is that you are allowing a path to your office, and your attention, of the obsessed, the lunatic and the national campaigning groups. Blogs make it easier for lobbyists.”* (Flynn 2004) Lastly, three MPs made a judgement that there simply would not be a sufficient audience which would be interested to make the effort worthwhile. If we use our typology to understand why MPs have not adopted a weblog, then resources (time) and activities (control) have shaped their attitudes (motive).

7.3.3 How MPs use their weblog

Although, as table 7.1 shows each weblog is unique, there are certain trends which seem to be replicated amongst most of the blogs. First, because the software and skills required are easier to use than a website, weblogs tend to be very topical. For example, Shaun Woodward (Lab) explains the 36 hours where the Commons and Lords disagreed on the Anti-terrorism Bill, and Tom Watson (Lab) asked for comments about the Gambling Bill that was before Parliament the following week. Second, the focus of the topics tends to be national or international, rather than local, supporting a Burkean approach. Third, with five of the seven MPs’ weblogs there is a sense of real community, with regular visitors who discuss issues/ideas. Blogging MPs may well be building a new representative model, but it is not necessarily one based on the constituency. Overall, there is a sense that both the MP and their visitors are pioneers in an emerging medium.

The interviews suggest that an MP’s initial views of what their weblog would do, and what its purpose was, changed after more exposure to the medium. For example, Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem) noted *“My original intention was to inform people about what an MP did...however, this got a bit boring and so the weblog developed.”* (Gidley 2006). Similarly Richard Allan (Lib Dem) noted *“My view certainly changed. Initially I thought that it would be a good way of expressing my personal views, but I moved to thinking that my weblog was a way of having a conversation with people who have similar interests to me.”* (Allan 2006) The experience of Clive Soley was not necessarily always so positive, as initially he expected

to get a dialogue going by asking questions and then respond back to them. Soley's initial model was very similar to Sunstein's, but he did not anticipate that some people might try to 'hijack' his blog by seeking to promote their own personal views at any opportunity. Therefore, he had to eventually and clearly reluctantly edit some comments (Soley 2006). MPs quickly evolved their utopia view into something more practical so that a weblog is used as a means of encouraging interaction, rather than just information provision (Kraut *et al.* 2003, Joinson 2003).

Table 7.1 Style and format of MPs' weblogs

| MP | Description of weblog style |
|-----------------|--|
| Richard Allan | Liberal Democrat. Stood down at the 2005 General Election. Very interactive, encouraged a two-way conversation to develop, especially on certain policy areas such as IT. Primarily spoke to a virtual audience and not to his Sheffield constituency. Has a tendency to muse on hot topics in the media. Uses humour. Apart from an occasional attack on Conservative Party policy, essentially takes non-partisan approach. 45 separate posts (over 38 days). |
| Sandra Gidley | Liberal Democrat. Has a constituency focus as well as non-constituency, for example, talks about her surgeries. Uses humour. Replicates a number of her newspaper articles. Does talk about personal non-political issues. Generates a discussion with visitors, but there are occasions when an obvious local partisan discussion is going on from a number of posters, some of who appear to be trying to use the weblog for their own interest. The most frequent poster had 146 separate posts (over 44 days). |
| Boris Johnson | Conservative. Probably the best known to the wider public, and has a unique style. Essentially posts are either based on his written work elsewhere, such as regular Daily Telegraph articles, or subjects suggested by a staff member who manages the weblog. The number of posts which are obviously from the MP themselves are few and infrequent. There is a sense of a discrete virtual community based upon this weblog. As a result there is a lot of personal banter between those who comment on the site. There is to some extent a sense that many of the visitors and commenters feel as a Conservative blog, that this is their home on the blogosphere. There is interaction, though it is facilitated by the staff member not the MP. 38 separate posts (over 28 days). |
| Austin Mitchell | Labour. A fairly well-known backbencher due to his media work. Takes a different approach to the others. There is no interactivity or feedback at all. This is a one-way communication channel. It is essentially based on material written elsewhere, such as articles, his views on specific issues and a regular report sent to the Governor of the Bank of England. Uses humour. Essentially his views on a range of current affairs. 43 separate posts (over 22 days). |
| Clive Soley | Labour. Stood down at the 2005 General Election. Powerful backbench figure as Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Very interactive, and there is a sense of a conversation, indeed he will post addressing comments made by visitors. Appears to be aimed at both constituents and non-constituents. Frequently included his parliamentary work such as Parliamentary Questions and interventions in debates. 44 separate posts (over 25 days). |
| Tom Watson | Labour. Very interactive, encourages a number of comments. At times there is a sense that parts of the Labour Party establishment are visiting and taking part in an internal discussion (such as when he posted against tactical voting). The blog discusses IT and blogging issues a lot. Uses humour and introduces personal, non-political issues. There is some content which suggest constituents may view it, but most appears directed to a national audience. 77 separate posts (over 42 days). |
| Shaun Woodward | Labour. His basic style is to promote the Government's policies and therefore explains a number of Government Bills passing through Parliament. There are constituency based topics, and national topics linked to the constituency. There is interactivity, but it is far less successful than the other interactive weblogs at attracting a high level of feedback. Has set up blog debates on a number of issues such as Casinos, Child Trust Funds and ID cards. The least frequent poster of all the MPs with a weblog. 11 separate posts (over 11 days). |

NB: This analysis is based on the content analysis of each MPs weblog.

One interesting feature of weblogs is that they give a sense of an MP's hinterland, which strongly supports Auty's (2005) findings of evidence of personality on their blogs. Whilst a few websites attempt to do this, with weblogs (and indeed e-newsletters) where the tone is more chatty and informal visitors can get an insight into the MP as a person. A content analysis of all the weblog posts found that 23% of postings covered a topic that was of personal interest to the MP. For example, Tom Watson had become a bloggers' champion,

and he frequently posted about new political blogs. He also posted several times about his preparations for becoming a parent, so that he referred to attending NCT (National Childbirth Trust) classes. Several MPs covered an eclectic range of topics, for example, Clive Soley wrote about 'Life, Death, God and Everything', and also his family tree. Six of the weblogs included a mix of policy and partisan issues with personal items about their life, while only one, Shaun Woodward, did not. Moreover, this mix varied, 61% of Boris Johnson's postings included personal matters, though this might be because his articles did, whereas none of Shaun Woodward's did. It is interesting to note that the researcher of one MP actively considering setting up a blog observed that "*Tom Watson's piece makes him come across as a very human MP.*" (Rogerson 2006) The blogging MP is unlikely to be a stranger to the regular visitor who will gradually get a sense of the MP as a human being.

The findings echo Auty's (2005) impression of personality regarding chatty styles and personal content, but in addition this research found that humour was commonly used to add to this sense of a hinterland. A content analysis of all postings from MPs found that 53% included some form of humour or irreverence. The most likely to have such an approach was Tom Watson, with 83% of his posts including humour. The two MPs who wrote a lot of articles, Boris Johnson and Austin Mitchell both used humour in over 70% of their posts, often because it was part of their newspaper columns that were used in the weblog. Whilst only 40% of Sandra Gidley's weblogs used humour, it was clear that she saw an important role in making the weblog feel a bit lighter and more interesting, "*If there was something which made me laugh or was of interest I would put it in*" (Gidley 2006). For example, she would include links to story items she thought were amusing or a bit unusual or surreal. Only two MPs, Clive Soley and Shaun Woodward, appeared to avoid the use of humour/irreverence. The introduction of topics of a more personal nature, and humour, gave at least six of the weblogs a less overtly partisan feel, and implies a move away from a collectivist, party dominated approach (Klingemann *et al.* 1994), and a move towards a more individualist form of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963).

7.4 The Effect of a Weblog on an MP's Workload

7.4.1 How MPs manage their workload

Common to all blogs appears to be that MPs posted comments which they thought would be of interest to visitors. The difference appears to be whether this is material they have already written, as with Boris Johnson and Austin Mitchell, or something specifically written for the weblog. For example, Clive Soley stated "*I wanted to open up a discussion*" (Soley 2006)

by posting ideas on a range of topics such as on the Arab-Jewish Forum, Iraq and whether he should continue to blog after he left the Commons. MPs' weblogs are essentially diary pieces with their views, though some MPs such as Sandra Gidley and Tom Watson do link to other sites which they think may be of interest as well. Because of the software, management of their blog is fairly easy, six MPs or their staff appearing to manage the blog themselves directly.

7.4.2 *The workload a weblog creates*

There is no uniform view of what effect a weblog has on an MP's workload. The press release of the launch of Boris Johnson's (Cons) blog states

The weblog is designed to channel a lot of Boris's existing output through one central Web presence. In short, the blog will have plenty of content fed into it without Boris having to raise as much as a finger.

For Johnson then (and indeed Austin Mitchell), the weblog is a form of salami PR ⁽⁶⁾ whereby existing material is presented to another audience in a slightly different format. Essentially the content is already written, the main workload impact is reformatting and inputting material for the weblog.

The view of the other MPs on their workload is mixed. Austin Mitchell found that, despite his use of salami PR, the weblog *"Absorbed a lot of the energies of myself and my staff."* (Mitchell 2006) Richard Allan believed that the weblog was mostly manageable

When trying to be really active on the weblog I would normally spend 30 minutes plus writing an article, and then 30 minutes responding to feedback. So it could take one hour a day, something like three to four times a week. So I was spending about an hour every other day. Allan (2006)

However, Clive Soley noted that it could get out of hand and require ever more time, *"At its worst, when I let the blog get out of control it was 2-3 hours a week, but when working best, as it does now, about one hour a week."* Certainly Sandra Gidley suggested she limited her amount of posting because *"It is quite time consuming, which is why I don't do the approach of some of the other MPs who type in loads of material into their blogs."* (Gidley 2006) ⁽⁷⁾ MPs who invest more time and effort into their weblog are more likely to view it as heralding a new form of representation.

7.5 Impact of Weblogs on an MP's Roles

Although an innovative and interactive communication channel, table 7.2 suggests that a

weblog does not help MPs fulfil their various roles. In particular, the constituency role appears to be the weakest, undermining the assumption behind the study of MPs' blogs by Auty (2005), Ferguson and Howell (2005) and Ferguson and Griffiths (2006). Each appears to assume that the purpose of a weblog is to enhance constituency representation, though Ferguson and Griffiths (2006) recognise that they might not, but the findings of this research suggest this is not the case.

7.5.1 Specialism

Weblogs do not appear to be used to help MPs publicise their role as a specialist. Table 7.2 shows that less than a third, 31%, of all weblog posts mention specialist interests. Such interests included weblogging, canals, the Middle East, terrorism, civil rights, cannabis use and the Bank of England's interest rates. Richard Allan is the most likely, with 58% of his posts mentioning an area of specialism, and Tom Watson the least likely, at 13%. The reason why a weblog does not appear to help promote the specialist role is probably due to the purpose of a weblog. Richard Allan explains this by stating *"The weblog filled a gap for reaching people with a like-minded interest to myself. The blog attracted a community of people who were interested in what I was interested in."* (Allan 2006) The purpose of a weblog, for at least five of the seven MPs ⁽⁸⁾, is more about developing a conversation (Baker and Green 2005) than it is about promoting themselves. As primarily an interpersonal tool to build relationships a weblog is used in a fundamentally different way from a website, which MPs use as essentially an information sharing channel (Kraut *et al.* 2003, Joinson 2003).

7.5.2 Scrutiny

Weblogs do not appear to be used for promoting the scrutinising work of MPs, with only 28% of all postings used in this way. The most common references to scrutiny was to note Parliamentary Questions tabled, EDM's supported and contributions to parliamentary debates, though some such as Austin Mitchell promoted their scrutiny of government policy by looking at non-governmental bodies such as the Bank of England. Richard Allan, at 49%, is the most likely to promote his scrutinising role. In large part this was a reflection that he devoted a lot of time to the anti-terrorism Bill, but also he assessed the ID Card Standing Committee discussions, of which he was a member. The least likely to use their weblog as a scrutinising tool, with 14% of his posts was Tom Watson. Labour MPs as Government backbenchers are not necessarily the least likely to promote the scrutiny function, with 47% of Austin Mitchell's posts supporting this role. That a weblog's prime purpose does not appear to be to promote the MP's activities on behalf of constituents, may explain why a blog

does not support the scrutinising role.

7.5.3 *Partisan*

Weblogs do not appear to be a tool for promoting an MP's party, so suggesting an individualist (Butler and Miller 1963) alternative to the collectivist approach (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). Whilst party policy content is discussed, such as Home Office policy on immigration and a speech by Tony Blair, only one MP's weblog appears to be a partisan tool. Shaun Woodward's (Lab) weblog is particularly likely to promote party policy, 82%, and national party activity, 73%. The content of MPs' blogs seems primarily written by them, with only two MPs, Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem) and Shaun Woodward (Lab) appearing to use any data from party headquarters. Outwith of an election, therefore, a weblog does not appear to be used as a hard sell promoting their party, its policies and activities. Rather, a weblog may be closer to ideal of a means of sharing and developing ideas (Kennedy 2004, Sunstein 2004, Flatley 2005, Baker and Green 2005). Therefore, as political communication an MPs weblog encourages the articulation of ideas (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995).

7.5.4 *Constituency role*

MPs' weblogs are not being used to enhance their constituency role. Only three MPs, Sandra Gidley, Clive Soley and Shaun Woodward appear to give any attention to their constituency. Of these, Sandra Gidley's is the most constituency focused with 26% of her posts referring to constituents, and 29% speaking for the constituency. Two MPs, Richard Allan and Tom Watson, do not have a single post which registers on the constituency role measurements. The reason for these low figures is clearly the fact that MPs do not see their weblog as primarily aimed at constituents. For example, Austin Mitchell felt that "*I get very few mentions about my weblog from constituents, I don't even think they read it,*" a sentiment shared by all the other blogging MPs interviewed. Indeed, Richard Allan made clear that "*I never intended for the weblog to be for local constituents.*" (Allan 2006) Both Gidley and Soley explained that there were only a small number of constituents who had accessed their weblog, and both had explanations as to why they had constituents logging on to their blog. For Soley this was due to the fact that his West London constituents are "*Fairly well wired to technology.*" (Soley 2006) Gidley had encouraged constituents to visit her weblog simply by the expedient of promoting the address in her leaflets put through constituents' letterboxes (Gidley 2006). A weblog is not essential to the constituency service model of representation (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006).

The existence of a weblog may in fact act against the needs of individual constituents. First, the emphasis on national issues may suggest that a weblog is supporting those MPs who take a Burkean view. For example, Clive Soley said *“One of the problems with our system is that MPs are expected to do too much constituency work. I have always seen myself as a national/international politician as well.”* (Soley 2006) A weblog enables Soley to achieve this more effectively. Moreover, a weblog may have a much more radical impact upon the link between an MP and their constituents. Richard Allan identified that he had two constituencies, one geographical and one of interest (Allan 2006). Moreover, Allan noticed a tension between the two *“Because they are challenging for my time. This is especially so given that the orthodoxy is that the importance of constituency matters is increasing.”* (Allan 2006) Therefore, the small band of MPs who create a weblog may actually be resisting the move towards more constituency service. Instead, blogging MPs may be developing a separate e-constituency based on non-geographic interests.

Table 7.2 How a weblog helps an MP fulfil their roles?

| Category | Percentage of MPs' weblogs meeting this criterion |
|--|---|
| 1) Promotes Specialism Mentions areas of personal interest/expertise | 114 (28%) |
| 2) Executive Scrutiny Promotes their parliamentary scrutinising role | 101 (25%) |
| 3) Partisan role Promotes party policy Promotes local party activity Promotes national party activity Encourages party membership/support Promotes party election campaigns Uses content provided by national party | 101 (25%) 64 (16%) 114 (28%) 1 (0.3%) 35 (9%) 7 (2%) |
| 4) Constituency role Refers to individual casework/constituents Speaks for constituency Seeks views on local issues Seeks views on national issues * Provides local information Promotes local community activities | 46 (11%) 48 (11%) 1 (0.3%) 6 (1%) 10 (2%) 4 (1%) |

* Several MPs received comments on national issues, but only in ten instances was the view of visitors actually asked for by the MP on a specific issue.

7.6 How MPs Communicate Via their Weblog

7.6.1 Weblog features

Table 7.3 suggests that only three communication features are likely to be promoted by a weblog: 89% of weblogs promote the MP's contact details; 78% provide an email contact form; and 36% provide a link to their website. The only MP whose weblog does not provide contact details is Richard Allan, who with Clive Soley does not provide an email contact form ⁽⁹⁾. The figure of over a third of weblogs promoting their website is skewed by one MP, Sandra Gidley who regularly promotes her website, the other six do not. Boris Johnson, Austin Mitchell and Sandra Gidley are the MPs most likely to promote articles and other media coverage they have secured. The fact that for five MPs weblogs do not promote a wide range of an MP's communication messages, suggests that the purpose of a weblog is very narrow. It is likely that the value of a weblog is largely to be found within the dialogic nature of this communication medium, supporting Sunstein's (2004) concept of ideas being shared.

One unintended side effect of having a weblog is that the novelty of having one has generated some media coverage. For example, Clive Soley noted *"It got me a limited amount of coverage, but not very much, and it was not especially something I went out of my way to do."* (Soley 2006) Sandra Gidley supported this by observing that *"Quite a few snippets were used from my blog, usually the funny bits. None of them was done with the thought of exposure, but they did gain some."* (Gidley 2006) This reinforces the point that the prime audience of a weblog was those who visit the blogosphere, not the wider community.

Several blogging MPs have an interest in IT policy, and not unsurprisingly the fact that they were active bloggers helped them. For example, Richard Allan noticed

That people introduce you at public meetings and refer to the weblog, so there is a bit of a Big Brother effect, in that people know who you are before they meet you. This certainly gave me some credibility. This is particularly important if I met a group with a specialist interest, such as digital rights, they judge you on your record not just a case of me coming in as a MP and claiming to be a very important person. (Allan 2006)

By having a blog an MP interested in IT policy was viewed as an active practitioner, and not just an outside policy maker. Therefore, for some MPs a weblog did act as a policy 'focal point' (Drezner and Farrell 2004).

Table 7.3 The use of MPs' weblogs as part of an integrated communications approach

| Feature | Percentage of MP's weblogs meeting this criteria |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| (1) Contact details | 359 (89%) |
| (2) Email contact form | 315 (78%) |
| (3) Promotes website | 146 (36%) |
| (4) Promotes campaigns | 44 (11%) |
| (5) Promotes media coverage secured | 34 (8%) |
| (6) Promotes speeches given | 18 (4%) |
| (7) Promotes public meetings | 8 (2%) |
| (8) Surgery details | 2 (0.5%) |
| (8) Press Releases | 2 (0.5%) |
| (10) Leaflets/posters | 1 (0.3%) |
| (11) Events calendar | 0 |
| (11) Printed newsletters | 0 |
| (11) Promotes e-newsletter | 0 |
| (11) SMS text messaging | 0 |
| (11) Promotes local membership | 0 |
| (11) Asks for volunteers | 0 |
| (11) Fundraising | 0 |

7.6.2 Is a weblog part of an integrated communication approach?

Although there are only seven MPs with weblogs, it is clear, that with one exception they do not use a blog as part of an integrated communication strategy promoting their messages via a range of channels. Only Sandra Gidley's weblog is integrated by promoting nine features. Boris Johnson and Clive Soley are considered semi-integrated, and the rest are unintegrated (Richard Allan has none of the features listed above). This does not mean that the quality of weblogs is poor, rather it is not part of the wider communicating mix, and stands alone from the other media as essentially an interactive relationship building tool (Joinson 2003), and therefore outwith of MPs' traditional didactic approach to communication.

7.7 Are MPs Following Weblog Best Practice?

7.7.1 Structure

Auty (2005 p353) noted that the design of MPs' blogs "*Were perfectly functional and easy to use.*" Further, it is clear from table 7.4 that the seven weblogs meet the structural requirements of the Best Practice model, even more so than MPs' websites and e-newsletters (see tables 5.5 and 6.8). This is probably due to the software used which makes it easy, and the very nature of weblogs: short and regular diary pieces. Only two MPs, Boris Johnson, 79%, and Austin Mitchell, 51%, are not always brief. This is probably due to the fact that these two MPs are the most likely to post articles written elsewhere, rather than short, pithy diary observations or links. The seven blogging MPs have fully grasped the structural requirements of this medium, which suggests that resources (skills and time) are not an issue for these seven MPs.

7.7.2 Content

As with e-newsletters, the strength of weblogs is that they can address very topical issues. Indeed, it is probably easier and quicker for an MP to post on their blog a response to a topical matter, than produce an e-newsletter. This can enhance an MP's control of their communication messages as they can bypass the media. Topics covered included ID cards, terrorism, the G7 meeting, MMR vaccines, the tsunami and indeed anything which was on the news agenda, or that an MP felt should be. However, Sandra Gidley did identify a potential problem, in that "*I did sometimes find that my responses were based on something which was immediate, and perhaps the blog should be more than this.*" (Gidley 2006) The emphasis on most weblogs is more on national content, stressing the point that blogging MPs see themselves within the Burkean tradition. Only 15% of content is local, and this figure is largely the result of Sandra Gidley and Austin Mitchell with 29% and 26% respectively of their posts focusing on local policy issues. For example, Sandra Gidley wrote about care homes in her constituency after a visit to one. Topicality encourages dialogue between MPs and weblog visitors, which supports the role of this medium in articulating ideas (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995).

Although weighted towards national policy issues, MPs selected material which interested them, and they thought might interest visitors. For example, Richard Allan noted

Material was not chosen in a scientific way, mostly it was just on things of interest to me. Over a period of time I tailored articles as I got a sense of what people would respond to. As a result it did not, generally, cover local issues because not many

constituents visited it (Allan 2006).

Weblogs are, therefore, a very personal medium, one which is inherently conversational and so shaped by the wishes of both the blogger and regular visitors, and so using political communication to encourage participation (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995).

7.7.3 Campaigning tool

As table 7.4 shows MPs have not used their weblog as major campaigning tool. All seven MPs do ask visitors to do something, though the only time Austin Mitchell did this it was to ask people to vote Labour at the forthcoming general election. The most common activity, from four MPs, was to ask visitors to visit another website of interest. For example, Shaun Woodward encouraged visitors to view the G7 website. Tom Watson's weblog was the most likely to filter other interesting websites and so link to other sites. Nearly a third, 32%, of Watson's blogs provided this filtering feature, in addition to the more common diary feature (Blood 2000b). Three MPs asked for feedback on particular issues, for example, Clive Soley asked a technical question about a tsunami, and Richard Allan asked for visitors' views on a range of topics including Bill Gates, E-government and policing the Internet. Richard Allan, in particular tailored his 'ask' to his audience of like minded individuals whom he knew were interested in IT. Boris Johnson asked visitors to help fill in a survey for a constituent who was conducting research. In one of his articles, which was replicated on the weblog, Johnson asked visitors to change their bra buying behaviour to help cotton workers in Sri Lanka. Weblogs occasionally help campaigns, but statistically this is clearly not their prime purpose. A weblog is not used to mobilise interested groups (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995).

The most common campaigning feature was to promote national campaigns, 31%, and to a lesser degree, local campaigns, 14%. Largely this reflected the topicality of a weblog and included discussion of a range of current affairs and long-standing policy issues. During the period of the research, two related issues dominated the discussion of most blogs, ID cards and terrorism. Two MPs were more likely than others to discuss national campaigns, 82% of Shaun Woodward's and 40% of Richard Allan's. The two most likely MPs to promote local campaigns were Austin Mitchell, 40%, and Sandra Gidley, 26%. As much as a weblog is a campaigning tool, it reinforces the Burkean tradition of an MP's interests.

7.7.4 Two-way communication

The data in table 7.4 raises an interesting question: how can MPs' weblog scores be so low in three categories but six weblogs are assessed as highly interactive? The answer is due to the nature of a weblog, and how both MPs and their visitors react to it. MPs ask only a limited number of direct questions, such as when Clive Soley asked whether he should continue his weblog, and Tom Watson wanted visitors' views on whether darts should be officially recognised as a sport. They do not tend to use the range of formal feedback mechanisms used in websites and e-newsletters such as surveys. One MP, Austin Mitchell, does not have a facility to enable visitors to post a comment, because the purpose of the weblog is purely one-way⁽¹⁰⁾. However, the reason why six MPs have blogs classified as highly interactive is that visitors are encouraged to comment on their postings. Whilst visitors do not always respond to every post from an MP, at times a very heated debate ensues. For example, Tom Watson's statement about tactical voting received over 40 comments with strongly felt views voiced. Boris Johnson's postings frequently lead to a large number of comments, often completely off-topic, as if the commenters were talking amongst themselves within their own online community which Johnson just happens to host. The fact that MPs' weblogs encourage vertical conversation (Norris 2002) between MP and visitors, and, horizontal conversation (Hale 2002, Castells 2002) between those visitors magnifies the effect their blogs have. Moreover, this implies that it is transforming the way MPs communicate with citizens.

Of the three MPs interviewed who encouraged visitors to post comments, all agree that their weblog created conversations. For example, Clive Soley noted that

Occasionally it does work like a meeting room without walls, with perhaps the best example being student tuition fees. I did not have to intervene, because a debate took place between a number of students and academics. The academics pointed out that they used to think like the students, but explained why they saw it differently now, and the students responded. So the discussion of the issue took place, I was just reading it and learning and letting the debate develop. (Soley 2006)

Soley's blog became, in this instance, like a personal debating chamber from which he could develop his own ideas, and shape those of others (Sunstein 2004). An MP's blog can create a 'ripple effect', so that as ideas are introduced the debate continues in both the wider blogosphere, and offline.

The key test is not just that a conversation develops, but that any dialogue may have an

influence on the MP. The evidence from the interviews suggests that these debates do indeed have an effect. For example, Richard Allan suggested that

If I was trying to clarify my thoughts on an issue, I would blog it and then people made comments. Then I could think about what they said. This is especially so if it was on a narrow policy area where I could not sit down with six MPs and discuss it. Therefore, my blog helped to influence my thinking. For example, with the feedback I received on Indie Media I asked additional Parliamentary Questions as a result of new information I received from the feedback. The blog works well when it helps give voice to new areas and opens up discussion. (Allan 2006)

A weblog can act as a useful sounding board whose equivalent does not exist offline.

The effect of a weblog on an MP's thinking was not just as a result of questions the MP asked, but also from comments posted from visitors. Clive Soley found that *"I was asked some good questions, such as on public services and education, which made you think about them."* (Soley 2006) For some MPs a weblog may have had some effect on their policy development, but this is not necessarily true of all MPs. Sandra Gidley suggests that the comments had little effect on her policies due, in part, to her belief that there was a fairly small readership (Gidley 2006). However, she also noted that there is potential within a blog to discuss controversial issues, such as smoking in public places.

Although the interactive nature of the weblog did help encourage dialogue, there was also a potential threat. Both Sandra Gidley and Clive Soley had problems with posters trying to hijack the blog for their own ends. Clive Soley noted *"Some comments went over the top because some people were so driven on certain topics, such as Iraq."* (Soley 2006) His tactic for dealing with such behaviour was the same as he would in a public meeting being undermined by one persistent individual, namely that *"You have to move away from them."* (Soley 2006) This concern of being taken over does raise a question of how MPs manage their weblog if posters try to hijack the site for their own views.

Table 7.4 Are MPs meeting Best Practice in using a weblog as a political communication tool?

| Feature | Percentage of MPs' weblogs with this criterion |
|---|---|
| 1) Structure | |
| Search engine/site map | 404 (100%)** |
| Brevity | 372 (92%) |
| Sticky * | 404 (100%) |
| 2) Policy content | |
| National | 199 (49%) |
| Local | 60 (15%) |
| 3) Campaigning tool | |
| Asks the visitor to do something | 70 (17%) |
| Seeks donations | 0 |
| Promotes local campaigns | 56 (14%) |
| Promotes national campaigns | 124 (31%) |
| Seeks volunteers | 1 (0.3%) |
| Seeks membership | 0 |
| Seeks to mobilise support | 5 (1%) |
| 4) Two-way communication | |
| Seeks feedback | 61 (15%) |
| Two-way asymmetrical communication | 1 (0.3%) |
| Two-way symmetrical communication | 25 (6%) |
| Level of interactivity with visitor/subscribe | Low 43 (11%) |
| | Medium 0 |
| | High 361 (89%) |

* This was assessed by whether they posted at least once a week.

** This was the total number of individual postings collectively by all seven blogging MPs.

7.7.5 Best practice or a different practice?

Table 7.5 suggests that none of the seven MPs' weblogs are expert, four are mediocre and three inept. This might suggest that MPs are not using their weblogs very effectively. However, another way of viewing this is to suggest that the model which applies to websites and e-newsletters, does not necessarily apply to weblogs. It appears that MPs use weblogs differently from how they use websites and e-newsletters. For most MPs, the reason for not following the Best Practice model is that policy is not as important on a weblog as a website or e-newsletter. A weblog is clearly not considered a campaigning tool, and the two-way communication is of an informal style, namely to encourage a dialogue rather than getting visitors to complete surveys. The data suggests an interactivity closer to Morris's (2003) view of senders responding to viewer needs, than the more formal approach of Auty and Cowen (2000).

Table 7.5 Which MPs' weblogs meet the Best Practice model?

| MP | Best Practice Model score |
|-----------------|---|
| Richard Allan | Structure 10 Policy content 4 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 2 Total: 17 |
| Sandra Gidley | Structure 10 Policy content 3 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 2 Total: 15 |
| Boris Johnson | Structure 9 Policy content 2 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 2 Total: 13 |
| Austin Mitchell | Structure 8 Policy content 4 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 0 Total: 12 |
| Clive Soley | Structure 9 Policy content 3 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 5 Total: 17 |
| Tom Watson | Structure 10 Policy content 1 Campaigning 0 Two-way communication 2 Total: 13 |
| Shaun Woodward | Structure 8 Policy content 4 Campaigning 1 Two-way communication 5 Total: 18 |

7.8 Behaviour of Visitors to a Weblog

7.8.1 Which MPs encourage comments?

The content analysis of weblogs did not just assess the actions of MPs: it also considered the response from those who commented. This analysis provides some indication of the behaviour of those who commented, and not the many more that only lurked ⁽¹¹⁾. Although based on only the six MPs whose weblogs provided a facility for visitors to post a response, it does, however, give us a sense of who blog commenters are, and what they post on.

Table 7.6 shows that just under two-thirds of MPs' posts get some form of response from

visitors, and hence potentially develop a conversation. Some MPs are clearly more successful at generating a response than others. All of Boris Johnson's posts get some form of response, as do 81% of Tom Watson's and 70% of Clive Soley's. Yet Shaun Woodward, Richard Allan and Sandra Gidley encourage responses from 36, 38 and 39 % respectively. The explanation for these differences may be due to the style and audience of each weblog. Boris Johnson's response rate is probably the result of two factors: the journalistic nature of his chatty posts; and the fact that many of his commenters seem part of a network society (Rheingold 2000, Castells 2002, Hassan 2004) to which Johnson's posts may actually be fairly incidental to their discussion. Clive Soley responds directly to comments which may encourage commenters as they realise that the MP will respond to them. The low rate of responses to Woodward's weblog might be explained by the fact that his approach was of vertical communication (Norris 2002), made the fewest number of posts, and consequently may have had a fairly small audience.

7.8.2 Frequency of visitor comments

The content analysis identified that a core group, approximately a tenth of all commenters, of regular commenters exists. This represents a hardcore which is interested in engaging in political discussion *via* a blog, which suggests an enhancement in citizen engagement (Della Carpini 2000). The six MPs have different levels of regular commenters. With Tom Watson having 20% and Boris Johnson 19%, as opposed to 8% for Richard Allan and none for Shaun Woodward. The regular commenters display two interesting characteristics. First, 20 commenters regularly visit more than one MP's blog, and indeed several obviously have blogs of their own and seem to accept certain MPs into their world of political blogging. This suggests the nascent development of a network society (Rheingold 2000, Castells 2002, Hassan 2004) in the blogosphere. Second, at times they seem to represent an elite, not just of British political bloggers but also of the parties themselves. For example, several of Tom Watson's posts on tactical voting attracted responses from a number of parliamentary agents, other elected representatives and probably Head Office staff. The effect of an MP's blog may be disproportional to the number of visitors because they attract a blogging and party elite, and so may act in the manner of 'focal points' as Drezner and Farrell (2004) suggest.

Although there is a small group of regular commenters, the vast majority, 64%, of commenters post only once. With these occasional commenters, it is less likely that an MP will be able to develop a conversation. It seems that MPs need to regularly post themselves to encourage regular commenters. Shaun Woodward, who posts least frequently of the

seven, has 19 commenters all of whom comment only once, whereas Boris Johnson with 202 different commenters has only 62% who comment only once. Not all commenters are transparent as to who they actually are, with 16% hiding behind the anonymity of aliases. Not unsurprisingly only a very small minority of comments, 3%, are clearly from constituents⁽¹²⁾. Moreover, the two most likely to encourage constituents are Sandra Gidley (15%) and Shaun Woodward (16%). We can therefore see two separate types of commenters, a small minority who take part in a conversation with the MP, and the majority who make an occasional interjection. The ability of MPs to use a weblog to transform their role is potentially limited by the response from those who visit their blog.

Table 7.6 The type of commenters

| Nature of comments | Measure |
|---|----------------|
| Number of posts from MPs* | 361 |
| Posts which attract comments | 229 (63%) |
| Number of commenters | 607 |
| Regular commenters** | 69 (11%) |
| Number of commenters with only one comment | 387 (64%) |
| Use of alias | 100 (16%) |
| Commenters who identify themselves as constituents*** | 21 (3%) |

* The statistics are based on only the six MPs who provide a facility for visitors to comment on posts.

** This is calculated by those visitors who commented on at least ten per cent of an MP's posts.

*** Other posters may have been constituents but it was not clear from their posts.

Of the six MPs' blogs with feedback, over half of all comments were in Boris Johnson's blog, 52%, which is primarily the result of the banter and discussion between several commenters. Frequently, commenters developed a thread away from the original post by Boris Johnson, or his staff member. This led to a real sense of a like-minded community, often based around their view of the Conservative Party, so suggesting Castell's (2002) network society in the blogosphere is an electronic extension of the offline world. There is no obvious explanation for how many different commenters an MP attracts. Whilst Shaun Woodward posts the fewest number of times and has the least number of visitors who comment (19), Sandra Gidley with the most posts has 170 commenters who reply. Tom Watson, the first MP to have a blog posted 77 times, resulting in 389 people responding. However, longevity of blog does not necessarily mean a larger number of commenters. The second blogger chronologically, Richard Allan, posted 45 times and has 141 visitors who comment.

7.8.3 *The nature of comments*

Assessing the nature of comments, the single most common response was ‘neutrality’, 39%, where the commenter might, for example, ask the MP a question about their post or indeed offer no opinion on the post. Boris Johnson was the most likely, 57%, to have neutral comments, but this might be explained by the fact that many of the commenters were talking to one another and not necessarily the original post. The critical and supportive comments on MPs’ weblogs cancel one another out, at 22 per cent and 18 per cent respectively. However, some MPs’ weblogs are more likely to secure either supportive or critical comments than others. The two MPs with the most supportive comments were Richard Allan, 36%, and Sandra Gidley, 32%. Richard Allan tended to focus a lot on IT issues and this might explain why he received such support. Sandra Gidley faced criticism from a small number of individuals who appeared to want to undermine her blog, but a lot of commenters (most appeared to be from their names local Liberal Democrat members) rallied to Gidley’s support. At times Gidley’s weblog seemed to be a venue for political point scoring by a number of commenters. Shaun Woodward is the most likely to receive critical comments, 68%, which in part might be explained by the fact that he took a more partisan approach and tried to defend government policy, almost inviting ‘virtual’ heckling. Clive Soley also had a fairly high level of criticism, 43%, in part possibly because he was a Government backbencher, but particularly because his views on Iraq supported the Government’s policy. A number of commenters consistently argued against his position on this one policy. Blogging MPs from the governing party appear more likely to attract critical comments. The fact that MPs weblogs are encouraging responses suggests an improvement in information flows (Bimber 2001, Shah *et al.* 2005), which may be enhancing citizen engagement. In addition, the number and nature of comments implies that a conversation is being developed which may suggest an e-constituency exists.

The nature of the responses from commenters suggests that weblogs may well help MPs in their policy development. That just under a fifth of comments, 17%, add new information suggests that a weblog may fulfil three inter-related functions. First, the weblog encourages the circulation of new ideas, both by MPs and their visitors (Sunstein 2004, Baker and Green 2005). Second, it provides the MP with a sounding board which as new ideas and information is added by commenters may help them develop their policy stance. Third, blogging MPs may use information gained in their offline parliamentary activities. New information tended to include links to websites that had further information, personal anecdotes, statistical information and expert experiences. The two most likely MPs to

receive additional information from commenters were Richard Allan, 27%, and Tom Watson, 21%, who frequently received comments on technical IT matters that they raised. Those MPs who have built up an e-constituency are most likely to be rewarded with new ideas and information for them to consider.

Table 7.7 The nature of commenters' comments

| The nature of comments | Measure |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Number of comments* | 1920 |
| Supportive | 344 (18%) |
| Critical | 418 (22%) |
| Neutral | 758 (39%) |
| Adds new information | 333 (17%) |
| Attempts to hijack blog | 43 (2%) |
| Responses from MP | 48 (3%) |

* These statistics are based on only the six MPs who provide a facility for visitors to comment on posts.

7.9 Summary

This research of MPs' weblogs is exploratory as MPs try to develop ways of using this new communication channel. Although weblogs appear to support the traditional Burkean approach, this small sample suggests that a weblog is clearly challenging the existing representative model, and not in the way envisaged by other commentators. We may be witnessing the creation of a separate e-constituency which exists only in the blogosphere.

MPs weblogs are being used as an unmediated communication channel which seeks to build relationships. As a political communication channel an MP's weblog encourages the articulation of ideas. A weblog enables MPs to bypass the media and their parties, and so help develop a more individualist model of representation. Therefore, a weblog may be changing the representative system by weakening existing power relationships.

The lessons from, and ways of operating, which might be applied to websites and e-newsletters do not necessarily apply to weblogs. Websites and e-newsletters are essentially static, but six of our seven weblogs were dynamic moving communication channels. The conversational tone of an MP's weblog suggests that they are something unique, requiring new models and ways of conceptualising their impact. Overall, MPs' weblogs are a means of developing and discussing ideas, and creating a sense of community wider than a geographic constituency by encouraging dialogue.

Footnotes

(1) Eric Illsley had a weblog during October 2004, but after that it was no longer published.

(2) This appeared in an article in his blog 'Why MPs should get blogging'

http://civesoleymp.typepad.com/clive_soley_mp/why_mps_blog.html

(3) Proxy blogs were set up by enthusiastic bloggers who wanted to encourage their MP to create their own blog. By the start of 2005 General Election campaign, 18 other MPs had a proxy blog but had declined to take up the offer to take it over. The 18 were (in order of when the proxy was created): Tim Yeo, Lewis Moonie, Alan Milburn, Sarah Teather, Jim Cousins, Nick Raynsford, Frank Dobson, David Lepper, Keith Vaz, Michael Clapham, Eric Illsley, Jeff Ennis, Glenda Jackson, Steve Pound, Paul Ketch, Paddy Tipping, Martin Linton, Mark Pritchard. Source:

http://www.bloggerheads.com/political_weblogs/archive/blogs_proxies

(4) Both continue to write their weblog outside of the House of Commons.

(5) The Liberal Democrat candidate at the Hartlepool by-election, Jody Dunn, who posted about some of the people in the constituency which was interpreted by her rivals and the media as attacking her potential constituents. Anthony King (King 2005) suggested that this comment on her weblog caused Jody Dunn to lose a by-election she had previously looked likely to win.

(6) The idea of salami PR is associated with Peter Mandelson who, when the Labour Party's Director of Communications in the late 1980s and early 1990s, would try to maximize media coverage by using a story in a number of formats or slightly redrafting it. Therefore, the term has generally come to mean the use of one story in a number of formats, so an article written in a newspaper might be used as the basis of a press release, put on a website, sent in an e-newsletter and be the basis of a speech.

(7) Although Gidley became one of the most frequent posters, what she is referring to is the length of posts.

(8) The weblogs of Richard Allan, Sandra Gidley, Clive Soley, Tom Watson and Shaun Woodward appear to be designed to enhance a debate, rather than be a one-way communication. Boris Johnson's weblog may appear one-way but it does generate debate. Austin Mitchell's weblog is clearly designed (as he confirmed in the interview) to promote his views by another means.

(9) Although both Allan and Soley provide a means for visitors to post comments on the weblog, they just do not provide a means to contact them outwith of the blog.

(10) Austin Mitchell had initially encouraged feedback, "But we could not handle them..."

The reason was simple: lack of time and resources.” (Mitchell 2006).

(11) Visitors to weblogs can be divided into two main groups. First, those who visit once and never return, and those who regularly visit. This second group can be sub-divided into those who comment (commenters) and those who do not (commonly known as ‘lurkers’).

They have also been referred to as blurkers (<http://www.samizdata.net/blog/glossary.html>).

Some lurkers become commenters, but many do not.

(12) Though presumably other constituents post it is not transparent that the blogger is their local MP.

CHAPTER 8

THE USERS' VIEWS OF MPS' INTERNET PRESENCE

8.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to add to existing research (Coleman 2001d, Ward *et al.* 2005) by asking users of MPs' websites and e-newsletters to assess them. The difficulty in collecting this data gives us an insight into the possible limitations of some MPs' Internet presence. Originally it had been intended to analyse separately the three MPs' website surveys. However, despite each MP's website survey being online for six months, the number of responses was very limited, probably reflecting the limited traffic MPs' websites receive. As a consequence, it was decided to amalgamate the three website surveys into one finding. In addition, the survey of Peter Atkinson's e-newsletter generated insufficient data for it to be used. This fact in itself tells an interesting story, for Atkinson is a fairly recent convert to an e-newsletter, with a small database, and is an infrequent producer of an e-newsletter which generated few responses ⁽¹⁾. Conversely, Steve Webb's and Nick Palmer's e-newsletters which are long-established, regular and based on a large database of subscribers, generated 890 and 227 responses respectively ⁽²⁾. The percentage of subscribers for these two pioneering MPs' e-newsletters is very similar, although proportionately slightly more of Webb's subscribers responded. One explanation for a slightly higher response rate for Webb is that he regularly asks questions, surveys and opinion polls of his subscribers, and hence they may be more used to interacting.

8.2 Who Visits an MP's Internet Presence?

8.2.1 Visitors to MPs' websites

From the interview sample, it appears that most MPs do not really know who visits their website. Of 16 interviewees asked if they knew who visited their website, 13 replied that they did not. For example, one MP commented "*Absolutely not, and this is a weakness*", and a researcher noted that they could access the logdata but lacked the skills to use it. The professional MP should have the necessary skills to use their website (Negrine 2007), but the interviews suggest that MP's use of a website is undermined by a lack of resources.

Appendix G explains the age, and constituent profile of visitors. The number of constituents and non-constituents is nearly equal. Although there are slight differences amongst the MPs regarding the age of visitors, the total figure for all three MPs suggest that the greatest number of website visitors are aged 18-44. Whilst it is not a surprise that Annette Brooke

attracts a slightly higher proportion of women visitors, overall men are twice as likely to visit MPs' websites. The age and gender breakdown is very similar to that of UK Internet users in general (British Life and Internet Project 2002). There are slight differences (see Appendix G) in regard to the self-identification of website visitors. Annette Brooke is more likely to attract those with an affinity to either her or her Party. Whilst both Ian Lucas and Gary Streeter have such a partisan link as well, it is not as strong, and they both attract supporters of other parties, suggesting that such visitors might be checking on what they are doing. All three MPs attract a fairly small number (7-15%) of undecided visitors. Most visitors are polar: they either have a clear political affiliation; or they are non-political. An overall profile of visitors to MPs' websites of being young, male and interested in politics is consistent with existing research (Norris 2001).

8.2.2 Subscribers to MPs' e-newsletters ⁽³⁾

Appendix H explains who is likely to subscribe to e-newsletters. Subscribers to Palmer's and Webb's e-newsletters are primarily constituents ⁽⁴⁾. There is a range of ages, though the pattern of subscribers does not mirror societal patterns of access to the Internet (nor MPs' websites as noted in 8.2.1). The greater number of subscribers to Webb's e-newsletter is in the 45-64 age range, and those of Palmer only slightly younger in the 35-64 age range. It is interesting that very few under 18s subscribe to either e-newsletter, which may either be that they are not being recruited or that the content is not tailored to their needs. Both samples are skewed towards male respondents, especially Palmer's where two-thirds are men, which is consistent with other research on political e-newsletters (Jackson and Lilleker 2007). Given that the gender differences of access to the Internet are now no longer as marked as they were, the content of these two e-newsletters may be less attractive to women. The responses suggest that both e-newsletters are considered to be the MP's personal e-newsletter as the local MP, and therefore support a move towards individualist representation (Miller and Stokes 1963). Respondents of both surveys strongly associated them with either Steve Webb or Nick Palmer the individual MP, not necessarily as a Liberal Democrat or Labour MP. Indeed, for both MPs the single largest political identification grouping was those that voted for the MP not their Party, with 41.5% for Webb and 34.8% for Palmer. There is a strong sense from respondents that they view the e-newsletter they subscribe to as a non-partisan communication channel.

8.3 Why Online Communication is Attractive?

8.3.1 How visitors hear of the MP's website

Table 8.1 suggests that a wide range of channels alerts visitors to the existence of a website. Those methods controlled by either the MP or their Party have fairly limited effect individually (though collectively they are a significant source of visitors). Although there are slight differences between the three MPs, the two most important channels, word of mouth and 'surfing' are not controlled by MPs. This suggests that politicians are following wider society and the corporate sphere in their understanding of how to promote a website, or utilise online political communication effectively (Downes and Mui 2000). Respondents are clearly self-selecting and so, as Norris (2001) suggests, they probably have an interest in both the Internet and politics. As a result, any conclusions can only be indicative because they may not be representative of all constituents in an MP's constituency.

Table 8.1 How did you hear about the website?

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Party membership pack | 1 (7%) | 7 (12%) | 3 (11%) | 11 (11%) |
| Party website | 2 (13%) | 1 (2%) | 3 (11%) | 6 (6%) |
| Another website | 1 (7%) | 9 (16%) | 5 (19%) | 15 (15%) |
| By meeting the MP | 2 (13%) | 3 (5%) | 3 (11%) | 10 (10%) |
| In the local press | 2 (13%) | 2 (3%) | 3 (11%) | 7 (7%) |
| Party email | 3 (20%) | 1 (2%) | 3 (11%) | 7 (7%) |
| Word of mouth | 4 (27%) | 13 (22%) | 10 (37%) | 27 (27%) |
| Party written literature | 2 (13%) | 5 (9%) | 3 (11%) | 10 (10%) |
| I was surfing the web | 1 (7%) | 22 (38%) | 4 (15%) | 27 (27%) |
| Other | 0 | 7 (12%) | 4 (15%) | 11 (11%) |

Other for Ian Lucas includes: Google 2; House of Commons website 2; Miscellaneous 3 (all one each).

Other for Gary Streeter includes: Miscellaneous 4 (all one each).

MPs' websites, as table 8.2 indicates, do not appear to attract a loyal following. The total for the three MPs indicates that only 6% of respondents regularly visit their websites. Indeed, only a third, 34%, of visitors admit to visiting more than once. Contrary to existing research it seems unlikely that MPs websites will encourage online citizen engagement (Bimber 2001, Weber *et al.* 2003, Jennings and Zeitner 2003, Shah *et al.* 2005). Rather, nearly two-thirds of respondents were visiting the website for the first time. This might be because these three websites are not 'sticky' (Jackson 2003), and so not attracting repeat visitors. Whatever the reason, MPs' websites have not helped them build up a 'supportive' audience over a period of time. At present a website is primarily a one-hit channel, suggesting that many MPs have yet to get beyond the bandwagon stage (Gibson and Ward 1998).

Table 8.2 How often do you visit this website?

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| This is my first time | 9 (60%) | 38 (66%) | 18 (67%) | 65 (65%) |
| Weekly | 0 | 3 (5%) | 1 (4%) | 4 (4%) |
| Monthly | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 0 | 2 (2%) |
| Occasionally | 4 (27%) | 7 (12%) | 5 (19%) | 16 (16%) |
| As and when I need information | 1 (7%) | 9 (16%) | 2 (8%) | 12 (12%) |
| Don't Know | 0 | 0 | 1 (2%) | 1 (1%) |

8.3.2 How subscribers hear about an MP's e-newsletter

Subscribers do not hear about either Webb or Palmer's e-newsletter by accident. Both MPs invest their time to regularly seek to increase the number of subscribers through a range of techniques. Indeed, the interviews suggest that, to a greater or lesser degree, the other MPs with an e-newsletter do exactly the same. Both Webb and Palmer make reference to regular 'trawls', so that if a constituent contacts them (by email, telephone, letter or face-to-face) about an issue, the MP will usually ask whether they would like to be added to the email list. This way they slowly, but regularly, build up their database. As most subscribers have already contacted their MP about an issue, there already exists a nascent relationship. They are probably more interested in politics, and certainly more likely to contact their MP. As a result, they are probably not typical of all constituents. This relationship is akin to the first stage of Christopher *et al.*'s (1991) 'loyalty ladder', and hence an MP's e-newsletter may be a means of progressing constituents up the 'loyalty ladder'.

Subscribers to the two e-newsletters tend to hear about them by different means (see table 8.3). For Webb, the most popular means are his website, 33%, and Liberal Democrat leaflets, 26.7%; yet for Palmer, the most popular source of subscribers are Party membership packs, 68.3%. Different MPs may take different approaches to how they promote their e-newsletter, reflecting their party culture. Webb's party, the Liberal Democrats, have been considered more 'web-savvy' (Walker 2000, IEA 2000, Halstead 2000, Jackson 2003, Coleman and Spiller 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005) which may account for why he is more likely to use his website. In addition, many Liberal Democrat MPs have traditionally used 'community politics' which places a high emphasis on local leaflets and newsletters as a communication channel (Russell and Fieldhouse 2004, Douglas 2005). This suggests that Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs may stress different communication channels to promote their e-newsletter.

Table 8.3 How did you hear about the e-newsletter?

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Liberal Democrat Survey* | 81 (9.1%) | |
| Their website | 294 (33%) | 22 (9.6%) |
| Party leaflet | 245 (27.5%) | 39 (17.1%) |
| Word of mouth/personal recommendation | 97 (10.9%) | 47 (20.7%) |
| By meeting the MP | 122 (13.7%) | 39 (17.1%) |
| In the local press | 65 (7.3%) | 19 (8.3%) |
| Party email ** | | 11 (4.8%) |
| Party membership pack ** | | 155 (68.3%) |
| Party web site** | | 4 (1.8%) |
| Correspondence with the MP | 111 (12.5%) | 47 (20.7%) |
| Other | 36 (4%) | 27 (11.9%) |

* Only asked of subscribers to Steve Webb's email consultations.

** Only asked of subscribers to Nick Palmer's email consultations

Other for Steve Webb includes: Can't remember 25; Another website 4; Google 3; Miscellaneous 6 (all with one response).

Other for Nick Palmer includes: Can't remember 13; Surfing the Internet 5; Via a local Councillor 3; Miscellaneous 6.

8.3.3 Why visit an MP's website?

Table 8.4 shows that the single most important motivation is to gain information (on the MP's activities 40%, and policy views 30%) (Blumler and Brown 1972, Katz *et al.* 1973, McQuail 1987, James *et al.* 1995, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Luo 2002). Both the MP and the visitor appear to view a website as a means of gaining information directly. MPs, and a proportion of their visitors, want to bypass the gatekeepers of the media and the party elite. Web technology is changing the nature of how individual politicians and citizens communicate (Street 1992, Cairncross 2001), which may lead to a shift in power relationships within a post-modern era (Norris *et al.* 1999, Norris 2000). A limited number of website visitors are motivated by 'personal ideological reasons' (Jackson and Lilleker 2007), in that only 14% access a website to inform their political view, and only 8% to help them decide whom to vote for. More than one-in-ten, 13%, do not know why they visit the website. Website visitors do not appear to be particularly interested in offering their opinions (on national issues, 9%, and local issues, 8%). Chapter 5 suggests that MPs largely deliver websites based on one-way communication, and the evidence is that this is what casual visitors want.

Table 8.4 Why do you visit this website?

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|--|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| To be consulted on the national issues of the day | 3 (20%) | 4 (7%) | 2 (7%) | 9 (9%) |
| To be consulted on the local issues of the day | 3 (20%) | 2 (3%) | 3 (11%) | 8 (8%) |
| Information on the MP's activities | 5 (33%) | 22 (38%) | 13 (48%) | 40 (40%) |
| Information on the MP's policy views | 2 (13%) | 16 (28%) | 12 (44%) | 30 (30%) |
| Information on local events | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 6 (22%) | 8 (8%) |
| Gain information directly, rather than through the media | 4 (27%) | 9 (16%) | 7 (26%) | 20 (20%) |
| Information about the Party | 4 (27%) | 5 (9%) | 6 (22%) | 15 (15%) |
| To inform my political views | 3 (20%) | 6 (10%) | 5 (19%) | 14 (14%) |
| To help me to decide who to vote for | 2 (13%) | 3 (5%) | 3 (11%) | 8 (8%) |
| To discover what my opponents are saying or doing | 2 (13%) | 1 (2%) | 6 (22%) | 9 (9%) |
| To be entertained | 1 (7%) | 3 (5%) | 2 (7%) | 6 (6%) |
| Don't Know | 1 (7%) | 6 (10%) | 6 (22%) | 13 (13%) |
| Other | 1 (13%) | 13 (22%) | 6 (22%) | 20 (20%) |

Other for Annette Brooke include: To help assist Government departments 1.

Other for Ian Lucas include: To find his contact details 12, Miscellaneous 1.

Other for Gary Streeter include: Research purposes 4; Miscellaneous 2.

8.3.4 Why subscribe to an MP's e-newsletter?

There is a slight difference in the most popular reasons why people want to subscribe to either Steve Webb's or Nick Palmer's e-newsletter. Table 8.5 shows that the prime reason why people subscribe to Webb's e-mail consultations is the desire to be consulted (on local issues, 89.6%, on national issues 73.5%). For Palmer's subscribers the prime motivation is to receive information (Nick Palmer's policy views, 77.5%, Nick Palmer's activities, 59%, local events, 52.4%). Such differences probably reflect the different approaches taken by each MP to their e-newsletter, and how technologies can be influenced by different political interests (Braun 1995). Whilst the motivation for subscribing to Palmer's survey is consistent with existing literature (Blumler and Brown 1972, Katz *et al.* 1973, McQuail 1987), Webb's suggests a new motivation, that of being part of a dialogue by offering their own views. Webb quite clearly views his e-newsletter as an interactive medium for him to assess his constituents' views on issues, whereas, Palmer is more likely to analyse a policy issue ⁽⁵⁾. There may be a party-specific use of an e-newsletter which explains this difference in approach. Palmer, as a Government backbencher, is more likely to seek to justify and promote the Government's view, and therefore his e-newsletter whilst designed to build relationships is weighted to the 'information portal' role. Webb, as an opposition MP, is more likely to listen and can afford to take a more conversational approach. Webb's e-

newsletter does not necessarily have to be as persuasive as Palmer's. Other MPs' e-newsletters are likely to reflect such different approaches based on whether the MP sits on the Government or opposition benches. The very nature of an e-newsletter influences and reflects subscribers' views of what they want from it, and thereby shapes wider society's perspective of an MPs e-newsletter (Street 1992, Cairncross 2001, Castells 2002).

Although the most popular reasons may differ slightly, there is a similarity in response from subscribers to both e-newsletters. The second level of motivation for Webb's e-newsletter is to receive unmediated information directly, 54.8%, receive information (Steve Webb's policy views, 48.9%, Steve Webb's activities, 34%) and to inform their political views, 38.2%. This is very similar to Palmer where the secondary motivations are to be consulted (on local issues, 69.6%, on national issues 64.8%), receive unmediated information directly, 68.3%, and to inform their political views, 50.7%. The material is being used by politically interested constituents to become more informed about current political issues, as part of a growing information-based society (Boheme and Stehr 1986), and this in turn helps to stimulate political participation.

Whether a person is a constituent or not, does have an effect on motivation to subscribe. For example, constituents are slightly more likely to want to be consulted on national and local issues, receive information about Nick Palmer, and significantly, (54% as opposed to 37%) to want information about local events. Interestingly, although constituents, 23%, are more likely to be motivated to seek help in deciding whom to vote for, 17% of non-constituents were also motivated by this factor. This might suggest that the e-newsletter has a wider, more partisan, effect in terms of potentially persuading people to vote Labour in other constituencies.

Gender has a slightly different effect on motivation to subscribe. For Webb's subscribers, it has virtually no influence, but for Palmer's, women are slightly more likely to be motivated by being consulted on local issues (77% as opposed to 66% for men), and to gain information directly (62% as opposed to 47% for men). Men are more likely to want the communication to inform their political views (59% as opposed to 34% for women), and to help them decide who to vote for (29% as opposed to 13% for women). Age has more influence on shaping motivations for Webb's than Palmer's e-newsletters. For example, the two youngest age groups to Webb's e-newsletters are more likely to be interested in receiving information about his activities, while the under 18s are the most likely to want to inform their political views, 64%, as opposed to the 30-40% of the other 6 age categories. Conversely, the under

18s are the least likely to want to be consulted on both national and local issues, in both cases at least 20% less than the other age categories. Each age group is slightly more motivated to gain information directly than the preceeding younger one, so the older age groups are more likely to be responding to the changing needs of an information society (Boheme and Stehr 1986). For Palmer, those aged 35 and above are slightly more likely to want information about local events. This suggests that an MP's 'information portal' role is likely to have more effect on the slightly older age groups.

Table 8.5 Why do you subscribe?

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|
| To be consulted on the national issues of the day | 654 (73.5%) | 147 (64.8%) |
| To be consulted on the local issues of the day | 797 (89.6%) | 158 (69.6%) |
| Information on the MP's activities | 303 (34%) | 134 (59%) |
| Information on the MP's policy views | 435 (48.9%) | 176 (77.5%) |
| Information on local events | 265 (29.8%) | 119 (52.4%) |
| Gain information directly, rather than through the media | 488 (54.8%) | 155 (68.3%) |
| Information about the Party | 100 (11.2%) | 39 (17.2%) |
| To inform my political views | 340 (38.2%) | 115 (50.7%) |
| To help me to decide whom to vote for | 166 (18.7%) | 50 (22%) |
| To discover what my opponents are saying or doing | 47 (5.3%) | 22 (9.7%) |
| To be entertained | 9 (1%) | 25 (11%) |
| Don't know | 13 (1.5%) | 2 (0.9%) |
| Other | 73 (8.2%) | 15 (6.6%) |

Other for Steve Webb included: To give views directly 52 (this is clearly ancillary to being consulted on the local and national issues of the day); Miscellaneous 14 (all with one response); Steve helped with a problem 5; An MP should be accessible 2.

Other for Nick Palmer included: To give feedback 5; A mixture of reasons 4; Miscellaneous 7 (all with one response).

8.4 How Information is Used

8.4.1 How website visitors use the information they receive

Table 8.4 shows that only 14% were motivated to visit a website to inform their political views. Yet in table 8.6 nearly three times this number, 38%, used the information they found at the website for this purpose. This suggests that in viewing a website, a number of visitors have used the visit, possibly unexpectedly, to help inform their political views. This suggests that the effect of a website may be contrary to Grieco (2002), and may actually strengthen the power of the sender of the message. It appears that the information gained has a 'ripple effect' whereby 23% of respondents used the information if discussing politics with others. The content of an MP's website has an influence beyond just those who view it, and thereby

encourages low level civic engagement (Della Carpini 2000). As MPs suggest (see 5.3.4), a large minority, 26%, of visitors are probably academics, students and journalists who use information gained for their own research purposes. However, 21% do not use the material at all, so we should not over-estimate the effect of an MP's website on visitors. The literature suggests a website is user-led (Ollier 1998, Ward 2001), yet the data implies that the power relationship between MPs and constituents may have altered little. Rather, a website provides individuals with information within a changing political environment (Boyle *et al.* 1984), which may help them make sense of what is happening in politics.

Table 8.6 How do you use the information you view?

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Forward interesting material to friends | 3 (20%) | 5 (9%) | 1 (4%) | 9 (9%) |
| If discussing politics with others | 3 (20%) | 17 (29%) | 3 (11%) | 23 (23%) |
| To inform my political views | 5 (33%) | 21 (36%) | 12 (44%) | 38 (38%) |
| To decide who to vote for | 4 (27%) | 7 (12%) | 3 (11%) | 14 (14%) |
| To help me persuade others | 2 (13%) | 3 (5%) | 2 (7%) | 7 (7%) |
| For my job | 1 (7%) | 8 (14%) | 5 (19%) | 14 (14%) |
| For research purposes | 3 (20%) | 13 (22%) | 10 (37%) | 26 (26%) |
| For news stories | 1 (7%) | 2 (3%) | 1 (4%) | 4 (4%) |
| To inform my campaigning | 2 (13%) | 4 (7%) | 2 (7%) | 8 (8%) |
| I don't use the material | 2 (13%) | 15 (26%) | 4 (15%) | 21 (21%) |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 (2%) |

Other for Gary Streeter include: Miscellaneous 2.

8.4.2 How e-newsletter subscribers use the information they receive

As table 8.7 shows, there is a similarity between how the different subscribers use both e-newsletters, with content used in two, interrelated, ways. First, it helps inform and shape the respondents' own political views, which is contrary to Sadow's (2000) view that voters do not gather political information online. This usage was noted by 67.5% of Webb's subscribers, and 72.2% of Palmer's subscribers. Indeed, for both e-newsletters this was the most popular way in which subscribers used the information they received. Second, it has a ripple effect where the information is used by subscribers in their discussions with others. This manifests itself in 43% of Webb's and 45.4% of Palmer's subscribers using the information when discussing politics with others. In addition, 30.2% of Webb's and 33.5% of Palmer's subscribers forward interesting material to friends. In previous literature (Blumler and McQuail 1968, Ohr and Scott 2001, Kaye and Johnson 2002), any ripple effect was limited to the politically active, but the data suggests that e-newsletters encourage those

less politically active also to discuss ideas with others. The information an MP puts into their e-newsletter has an effect on a wider audience than just those who subscribe. Even more so than website, an e-newsletter appears to contradict the view that the Internet is user-led (Ollier 1998, Ward 2001, Grieco 2002), in fact it seems to be strengthening the MP's position. However, the consequence is not all one-way, these two e-newsletters are encouraging greater civic engagement (Della Carpini 2000, Putnam 2000), which suggests that other MPs' e-newsletters will have a similar effect. How subscribers use e-newsletters supports the view that computer technology can help communicate information effectively (Abranson *et al.* 1988, Smith 1998).

In terms of uses, Palmer's constituents, are not unsurprisingly more likely to use the e-newsletter to decide whom to vote for, 28%, but it is interesting that 8% of non-constituents also use the e-newsletter to decide whom to vote for. This suggests that the e-newsletter helps persuade some people to vote Labour in another constituency. Identified voting behaviour has an impact upon how subscribers use the e-newsletter. The closer the association with either the Liberal Democrats (for Webb's subscribers) or the Labour Party (for Palmer's subscribers), the more likely they are to use the material to inform their views, and when discussing politics with others. This suggests that there is a ripple effect of the e-newsletter beyond just those who subscribe, and therefore it may have tangible effects on wider society (Street 1992). For both e-newsletters, 33% of undecided voters used the material to help them decide whom to vote for. In addition, 17% of Webb's subscribers who vote for other parties also use the material for this reason, as do 8% of Palmer's subscribers who vote for another party. This explains, in part, why some supporters of other parties switched to vote for either Webb or Palmer at the 2005 General Election. An e-newsletter, in bypassing gatekeepers (Ward 2001) may be decentralising political communication, and hence levelling the 'playing field' (Rheingold 1993, Stone 1996, Gibson and Ward 1997, Bimber 1998a, Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2007). An e-newsletter provides MPs with 'wriggle room' to provide a service for constituents and acting in ways outside of the party framework, and so enhancing an individualist approach to representation (Butler and Miller 1963).

Table 8.7 How do you use the information you receive?

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| Forward interesting material to friends | 269 (30.2%) | 76 (33.5%) |
| If discussing politics with others | 383 (43%) | 103 (45.4%) |
| To inform my political views | 601 (67.5%) | 164 (72.2%) |
| To decide whom to vote for | 202 (22.7%) | 58 (25.6%) |
| To help me persuade others | 95 (10.7%) | 24 (10.6%) |
| For my job | 31 (3.5%) | 16 (7%) |
| For research purposes | 35 (3.9%) | 11 (4.8%) |
| For news stories | 46 (5.2%) | 19 (8.4%) |
| To inform my campaigning | 48 (5.4%) | 8 (3.5%) |
| I don't use the material | 42 (4.7%) | 9 (4%) |
| Other | 73 (8.2%) | 24 (10.6%) |

Other for Steve Webb included: To give views directly 52 (this is clearly ancillary to the two most popular motivations); Miscellaneous 14 (all with one response); Steve helped with a problem 5; An MP should be accessible 2.

Other for Nick Palmer included: To gain general information 12; To give my views 8; To discuss local issues with friends 2; Miscellaneous 2 (all with one response).

8.5 The Effect of an MP's Internet Presence

8.5.1 The effect of a website on visitors

A website has limited effect on visitors'; indeed 19% state it has none at all. The main effect, as table 8.8 shows, is in providing information, with 36% of visitors knowing more of what an MP is doing on their behalf, and 22% have a clearer view of their policies. Whilst improving the information website visitors have of an MP has value to that MP, the data does not suggest that websites have helped MPs persuade voters, mobilise their support or generate new resources such as volunteers or funding. Most visitors to an MP's website witness a snapshot of that MP's public persona, which the findings from Chapter 5 suggest is exactly what MPs want it to do. Visiting an MP's website enhances civic participation at the level of showing an interest in public affairs (Della Carpini 2000). A website transfers information (Barnes 2001, Kraut *et al.* 2003), and its impact is probably intangible in shaping constituents' world view of their MP (Street 1992).

Table 8.8 As a result of visiting a website

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|--|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| I am more supportive towards the MP | 2 (13%) | 13 (22%) | 3 (11%) | 18 (18%) |
| I am less supportive towards the MP | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 0 | 2 (2%) |
| I know more of what the MP is doing on my behalf | 8 (53%) | 19 (33%) | 9 (33%) | 36 (36%) |
| My attitude towards the MP is unchanged | 3 (20%) | 15 (26%) | 15 (56%) | 33 (33%) |
| I have changed my mind on policy issues | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 2 (7%) | 4 (4%) |
| I have not changed my mind on policy issues | 2 (13%) | 5 (9%) | 4 (15%) | 11 (11%) |
| I have a clearer view of the MP's policies | 5 (33%) | 10 (17%) | 7 (26%) | 22 (22%) |
| I have contacted the MP | 2 (13%) | 4 (7%) | 2 (7%) | 8 (8%) |
| I have joined the MP's party | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 0 | 2 (2%) |
| I have volunteered to help the MP | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 1 (4%) | 3 (3%) |
| I have donated money to the MP's campaigns | 1 (7%) | 1 (2%) | 1 (4%) | 3 (3%) |
| I have recommended their website to my friends | 2 (13%) | 2 (3%) | 2 (7%) | 6 (6%) |
| It has no effect at all | 2 (13%) | 12 (21%) | 5 (19%) | 19 (19%) |
| Other | 0 | 1 (2%) | 0 | 1 (1%) |

Other for Ian Lucas include: Miscellaneous 1.

8.5.2 The effect of an e-newsletter on subscribers

In contrast to visiting a website, table 8.9 shows that subscribing to an MP's e-newsletter does appear to have a more tangible effect on political discourse (Street 1992). First, it is an effective means for both MPs to get across what they are doing for constituents, with 81.1% of Webb's and 85.9% of Palmer's subscribers recording this impact. This further supports the argument that an e-newsletter is not necessarily user-led, but that it is an effective information-providing tool (Boyle *et al.* 1984). In addition, 53.7% of Webb's and 71.4% of Palmer's subscribers believed that it helped clarify the MPs' policy views. Given that Palmer stresses the discussion of policy issues, this probably explains why his subscribers score this higher. Second, there is evidence that the e-newsletter is helping to build and strengthen both MPs' relationship with subscribers (Kraut *et al.* 2003). With 76.7% of Webb's respondents and 78.4% of Palmer's respondents reporting that they are more supportive towards the MP, this implies that they have moved up the loyalty ladder (Christopher *et al.* 1991). It also adds to Eighmey and McCord's (1998) research by suggesting that it is e-newsletters, in particular, which help to develop continuing

relationships. Third, the MP-constituent relationship has been further enhanced by the fact that 48.1% of Webb's, and 57.3% of Palmer's subscribers have subsequently contacted the MP as a result of receiving the e-newsletter. This is further evidence of the tangible effect of a technology on politics (Street 1992). Fourth, more than a third, 38.7% of Webb's and 36.6% of Palmer's respondents, consider themselves part of an online community, which may be the basis of a network society (Rheingold 2000, Castells 2002, Hassan 2004), and therefore suggests that an e-newsletter is adding to users' sociability (Kraut *et al.* 1999, Gunther *et al.* 2002). A dual-identity group exists who are both e-constituents as well as physical constituents, and thereby adding to the nature of society (Cairncross 2001).

If the strength of an e-newsletter is in informing and interacting with constituents which results in building closer relationships (Barnes 2001), it is far less successful as a persuasive tool. Only 9.8% of Webb's subscribers, and 14.1% of Palmer's subscribers have changed their mind on policy issues. The reason why subscribers to Palmer are slightly more likely to have changed their policy views may reflect the fact that he is more likely to spend a lot of time examining a policy, and explaining his thinking on it. As a backbench Government MP, Palmer is more likely to try to persuade on policy, where Webb as an opposition MP takes a 'listening' approach.

Whilst very limited, there is some indication that a e-newsletter has provided each MP with some additional tangible help (Street 1992). As a result of receiving Webb's email consultations list, 4.9% of respondents volunteered to help him, 3.5% donated money to Webb's campaigns and 1.6% joined the Liberal Democrats. Palmer's e-newsletter has encouraged 12.3% of respondents to volunteer to help him, 3.5% donated money to his campaigns and 1.3% joined the Labour Party. Both e-newsletters have helped convert, via the loyalty ladder (Christopher *et al.* 1991), some who are politically interested into party activists. If applied to all MPs' e-newsletters, this suggests that they are a tool encouraging those with an interest in politics to get more involved.

Additional comments (see Appendix I) made by some respondents indicate that there are members, or supporters, of other political parties who help out Webb or Palmer on local issues. This does not mean that such people necessarily vote for them, but they are prepared to get involved in inter-party campaigns. Therefore, these two e-newsletters have helped build cross-party civic culture at a constituency level (Della Carpini 2000, Putnam 2000). The assumption has been that any new technology will reflect political interests (Street 1992, Braun 1995, Street 2001), and whilst this may well be true, an e-newsletter may be

encouraging a less partisan approach to politics (Di Maggio 2001, Cairncross 2001, Castells 2002) If this applies to all MPs with an e-newsletter, they will help to increase active participation and engagement in the political process, and quite possibly shape it towards a less partisan, and more constituency based approach. The constituency-active MP can act as a focal point for non-partisan local community activity.

In terms of effects, it is interesting to see the response of non-constituents. For example, 89% of constituents, as opposed to 63% of non-constituents, are likely to know more of what Palmer is doing on their behalf. Interestingly, where 12% of constituents volunteered to help Palmer, 17% of non-constituents did. This is in part explained by the fact that a number of ex-constituents and personal friends of Nick Palmer subscribe, but it also suggests that an e-newsletter can have an influence beyond a geographic constituency. Although constituents are more likely, 58%, to recommend the e-newsletter to their friends, some 46% of non-constituents also do likewise. If we assume that many of their friends live beyond Palmer's constituency this helps further promote his views to an e-constituency. Further supporting the idea of an e-constituency is that 33% of non-constituents are almost as likely as constituents, 37%, to feel part of an online community.

Identified voting behaviour has some bearing on the influence of e-newsletters. As might be expected, Party members and supporters are the most likely to become supportive towards the MP, and therefore the e-newsletter is clearly shoring up existing support. However, significant numbers of those who vote for, or are members of, another party have become more supportive as well. This suggests a non-partisan relationship building, and may be the basis for some voters to convert. Moreover, this relationship building appears to be developing a parallel e-constituency with, for example, a significant minority of other party supporters and members noting that they feel part of an online community.

Table 8.9 As a result of subscribing to an e-newsletter

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| I am more supportive towards the MP | 683 (76.7%) | 178 (78.4%) |
| I am less supportive towards the MP | 5 (0.6%) | 8 (3.5%) |
| I know more of what the MP is doing on my behalf | 722 (81.1%) | 195 (85.9%) |
| My attitude towards the MP is unchanged | 135 (15.2%) | 26 (11.5%) |
| I have changed my mind on policy issues | 87 (9.8%) | 32 (14.1%) |
| I have not changed my mind on policy issues | 174 (19.6%) | 42 (18.5%) |
| I have a clearer view of the MP's policies | 478 (53.7%) | 162 (71.4%) |
| I have contacted the MP | 428 (48.1%) | 130 (57.3%) |
| I have joined the MP's party | 14 (1.6%) | 2 (1.3%) |
| I have volunteered to help the MP | 44 (4.9%) | 28 (12.3%) |
| I have donated money to the MP's campaigns | 31 (3.5%) | 8 (3.5%) |
| I have recommended their e-newsletter to my friends | 234 (26.3%) | 95 (41.9%) |
| I feel that I am part of an online community | 344 (38.7%) | 83 (36.6%) |
| It has no effect at all | 11 (1.2%) | 3 (1.3%) |
| Other | 20 (2.2%) | 16 (7%) |

Other for Steve Webb included: Feel I have a voice 5; Impressed that Steve Webb listens 3; Miscellaneous (all one response each) 12.

Other for Nick Palmer included: Impressed that Nick Palmer listens; Feel I have a voice 3, Miscellaneous (all one response each) 8.

8.6 The MP-constituent Relationship

8.6.1 How e-newsletters enhance the relationship between the MP and subscribers

The data from table 8.9 strongly suggests that an e-newsletter helps strengthen the relationship between at least three-quarters of subscribers and the MP. There was also additional qualitative evidence (see Appendix I) which gives an indication of what the e-newsletter means for some subscribers. Three of the questions ⁽⁶⁾ had an option '*Other, please specify*', and several subscribers used this to expand on what was the impact, for them, of subscribing. Whilst clearly not representative, many of the comments give an insight into of how a number of individual subscribers now think about their MP.

The comments (Appendix I) indicate that, as citizens, subscribers like to have their views heard, and that they equally appreciated the focus on local issues. It is clear that amongst those subscribers who made a comment, there is a strong sense that they believe, as a result of subscribing to the e-newsletter, that their views count. A typical response to Webb's e-consultations was from one subscriber: "*It is good to be asked about how I feel on local and national issues.*" One surprised subscriber to Palmer's e-newsletter is stronger, "*This is the best bit...He actually reads my feedback and responds. Wow.*" This form of activity is beyond that suggested by Auty and Cowen (2000), rather it is nearer to that suggested by

Williams *et al.* (2000), in that subscribers become actively involved. There is a sense from a number of responses that many constituents are surprised that they are given a voice. As a result, a number of subscribers suggested that the e-newsletter had enhanced the political process. For example, one subscriber to Webb's email consultations noted that it is important *"To be able to engage in the decision making process in Parliament."* Similarly, one of Nick Palmer's subscribers suggested that *"I feel more part of the political process."* The effect of this is clearly stated by one of Webb's subscribers who said *"The email consultation service has re-awoken my interest in local/national issues."* An observation by one of Palmer's subscribers suggests that the e-newsletter has enhanced the political system in that *"It has helped reduced some of my cynicism of politics and politicians."* These comments suggest that for some subscribers an e-newsletter is qualitatively changing their thinking towards the political system. These two e-newsletters appear to be strengthening the 'social bond' (Norris and Curtice 2004), resulting in enhanced civic engagement (Putnam 2000). The views of some constituents have changed towards their MP, and as a consequence the parliamentary representative system.

8.7 How the Internet Compares With Other Channels

The web-hosted surveys have generated data on why visitors to MPs' Internet presence visited them, how they used them and with what effect. But the value of the users view is not just in addressing specific websites, but also communication from, and to, their MP. As a result, the web-hosted surveys also addressed where constituents felt the Internet fitted within political communication. This provided a context for how importantly, this admittedly Internet-aware sample viewed the Internet compared to other communication channels for hearing about, or communicating with, their MP ⁽⁷⁾.

8.7.1 How website visitors rate different communication channels as a means of being informed about their MP

Table 8.10 identifies three themes of how respondents prefer to hear information about an MP. First, and most popular, at 46%, is an MP's website, suggesting that there is an Internet-aware group which might become the basis of an e-constituency in the future. Second, local media communications channels, especially local newspapers, but also radio and television are a major source of such information. This supports the view of Franklin and Richardson (2002), and Negrine and Lilleker (2003), that local media relations are an important communication channel for MPs. Third, for visitors to websites, face-to-face contact may be the bronze-standard now and not Mutz's (2001) gold-standard. MPs should not ignore their

websites, but they could link them to their local media relations strategy and use it as a means for visitors to contact them directly. A website implies an incremental change, where traditional media's role of information sharing has not been usurped (Katz and Rice 2002).

Table 8.10 The importance of communication channels to inform you about the MP

| Channel | Annette Brooke % Rated as important | Ian Lucas % Rated as important | Gary Streeter % Rated as important | Total % Rated as important |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Local newspapers | 7 (47%) | 20 (35%) | 13 (48%) | 40 (40%) |
| Local radio | 4 (26%) | 11 (19%) | 8 (29%) | 23 (23%) |
| Regional television | 6 (40%) | 10 (17%) | 5 (19%) | 21 (21%) |
| National newspapers | 2 (13%) | 9 (16%) | 5 (19%) | 14 (14%) |
| National radio | 2 (13%) | 8 (14%) | 2 (7%) | 12 (12%) |
| National television | 5 (33%) | 8 (14%) | 3 (11%) | 16 (16%) |
| News organisations websites | 3 (20%) | 7 (12%) | 3 (11%) | 13 (13%) |
| Party leaflets | 3 (20%) | 11 (19%) | 5 (19%) | 19 (19%) |
| Face-to-face conversations with the MP | 7 (47%) | 16 (28%) | 14 (52%) | 37 (37%) |
| Public meetings | 4 (26%) | 12 (21%) | 8 (30%) | 24 (24%) |
| Friends and family | 2 (13%) | 11 (19%) | 4 (15%) | 17 (17%) |
| MP's website | 7 (47%) | 23 (40%) | 16 (59%) | 46 (46%) |

NB: Importance is based on the percentage of respondents who rated a channel either 4 or 5 (see endnote 7 for an explanation of this value system.)

8.7.2 How e-newsletter subscribers rate different communication channels as a means of being informed about their MP

There is a strong sense from both sets of respondents that they like to receive information via their MP's online presence, which may suggest that for this Internet-literate group an e-newsletter is helping to transform citizen engagement (Klein 1999). For example, as table 8.11 shows, 76.9% of Webb's subscribers, and 89% of Palmer's prefer to hear about them via the e-newsletter. In addition, 46.2% of Webb's subscribers like to hear about him via his website, as do 26% of Palmer's. This strongly suggests that these two MPs have a growing parallel e-constituency of constituents who enjoy being communicated with via an e-newsletter. Other MPs with an established e-newsletter, presumably, also have both online and geographic constituents.

Table 8.11 The importance of communication channels to inform you about the MP

| Channel | Steve Webb % Rated as Important | Nick Palmer % Rated as Important |
|--|--|---|
| Local newspapers | 324 (36.4%) | 44 (19.3%) |
| Local radio | 145 (16.2%) | 20 (8.8%) |
| Regional television | 283 (31.8%) | 31 (13.6%) |
| National newspapers | 163 (18.3%) | 19 (8.4%) |
| National radio | 152 (17.1%) | 15 (6.6%) |
| National television | 196 (21.9%) | 19 (8.4%) |
| News organisations' websites | 116 (13%) | 19 (8.4%) |
| Party leaflets | 374 (42.1%) | 47 (20.7%) |
| Face-to-face conversations with the MP | 274 (30.8%) | 78 (34.4%) |
| Public meetings | 180 (20.4%) | 55 (24.2%) |
| Friends and family | 85 (9.6%) | 23 (10.1%) |
| MP's website | 411 (46.2%) | 59 (26%) |
| MP's e-newsletter | 684 (76.9%) | 202 (89%) |

NB: Importance is based on the percentage of respondents who rated a channel either 4 or 5.

8.8 Summary

The majority (two-thirds) of respondents to the three MPs' websites are viewing their website for the first time. This means that any effect their website has is likely to be transient, very few respondents were regular visitors of an MP's website. If we assume that the visitors to all other MPs' websites display a similar pattern, then most MP's websites are probably reaching most visitors only once. Websites are, therefore, primarily a 'one-hit' technique. If these findings apply to all MP's websites, this suggests that visitors appear happy that an MP's website is essentially a monologue, which contradicts Coleman (2001d) who suggested website visitors wanted a dialogue. Rather, it tends to support the development identified by Ward *et al.* (2005) that constituents may want more information provision as opposed to interaction. The main use of an MP's website, the sample suggested, is to help inform visitors' political views within the wider context of an information society (Boheme and Stehr 1986).

E-newsletters appear to have a greater impact than websites. Although the two MPs have different approaches to how they use their e-newsletter, the basic findings of why users subscribe to them and how they use them are very similar. These two e-newsletters serve a specific community which is Internet literate, and use the e-newsletter to gain political information. As a result they will, especially Steve Webb's subscribers, engage with the MP's e-newsletters and appear to admit being influenced by it.

The data suggests that there are key differences between the two channels. Visitors to websites are much more likely to be interested in accessing information about their MP, and hence view them as a monologue. Subscribers to e-newsletters are interested in accessing information about their MP, but they are also very interested in a conversation which enables them to provide their feedback on issues and policies. Despite the obvious comparisons, and differences, between the views of respondents to websites and e-newsletters, there is one consistent theme, that of a 'ripple effect'. Over a fifth, 23%, of respondents who visited websites noted that they used the material they accessed in discussions on politics with others. E-newsletters were even more effective in encouraging subscribers to use information contained within them when discussing politics with others (43% of Webb's subscribers and 45.4% of Palmer's). In addition, e-newsletters offered a further means of 'rippling out' an MP's views, namely by forwarding material to friends. The effect of an MP's website or e-newsletter extends beyond just those who visit or subscribe.

Footnotes

- (1) Indeed, Peter Atkinson is considering moving away from e-newsletters, and possibly making greater use of podcasts via his website.
- (2) It was agreed with both Steve Webb and Nick Palmer that this information would not be published as it might be useful to their political opponents.
- (3) The term 'e-newsletter' is used throughout this chapter, but as noted earlier in Chapter 7, Steve Webb refers to his as an email consultation list because its main purpose is for him to consult with constituents on matters of policy.
- (4) The non-constituents are made up of ex-constituents who want to remain on the list or a few personal friends of Nick Palmer (personal correspondence 1/11/06).
- (5) This does not mean that Nick Palmer does not encourage feedback, and he occasionally uses surveys, rather that he is more likely to emphasise the in-depth consideration of a policy issue or a local campaign.
- (6) The questions with 'Other please specify' asked 'Why they Subscribe', 'How do you use the Information', 'As a result of receiving the e-newsletter'.
- (7) Using a Likert scale respondents were asked (see Appendix C, questions 14 and 15, and Appendix D, questions 11 and 12) to rate on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being of little importance and 5 being of great importance) both channels for how they found out information about their MP, and how they prefer to give their MP their views on policy issues. In order to identify whether a feature was considered 'important' the percentage of respondents that rated it either 4 or 5 were added up to give a total figure.

CHAPTER 9

THE INTERNET: A VOTE WINNER?

9.1 Introduction

Voting behaviour is affected by a number of factors, and several different schools of thought have sought to explain them. The traditional view, to be found in the Nuffield election studies, is that class was the key determinant factor. This approach was heavily influenced by the Michigan School which suggested that voters with certain backgrounds had a strong identification with a party. They were, in effect, a Labour or a Conservative ‘voter’. From the 1980s, a number of commentators began to challenge this orthodoxy by suggesting that dealignment was undermining the impact of class (Sarlvik and Crewe 1983, Rose and McAllister 1986, Denver 1998). Rational choice models (Downs 1957, Himmelweit *et al.* 1985, Rose and McAllister 1986) believe that voters decide which parties’ policies best meet their own self-interest. Therefore, they have sufficient understanding of a party’s policies to make a clear choice. Dunleavy and Husbands (1985) suggested that voting behaviour was based on sectional cleavages, such as education, home ownership and transport. This study does not focus on voting behaviour *per se*, rather the emphasis is on whether MPs believe that e-communications can influence voting behaviour, and if the receivers of those e-communications confirm that it has in fact had such an effect.

There is a growing body of work which suggests that a high-profile locally active MP can secure a ‘personal vote’. For example, Butler and Collins (2001) suggest that ‘constituency service’ may be worth up to 500 votes. A similar, but slightly higher figure for the personal vote is given by Curtice and Steed (1997), who suggest that MPs with a high-profile in the constituency may benefit by 750-1,000 votes. There is no means of being absolutely certain what the effect may be, and it will probably vary from MP to MP, but working hard in the constituency may be the difference between victory and defeat in a closely fought electoral contest. An MP active in their constituency over a period of time, may benefit from an ‘incumbency effect’ (Krasno 1994). This chapter will consider what effect an MP’s online presence may have on their election prospects.

Greater local activity by individual politicians may also help encourage the development of a local permanent campaign. The phrase ‘permanent campaign’ was coined by Blumenthal (1980), so that the distinction between campaigning and governing is blurred (Ornstein and Mann 2000). In the recent past, there was a clear separation between the election campaign and governing, but now “*Every day is Election Day*” (Heclo 2000, p17). Coleman (2005)

has suggested that the existence of the permanent campaign has resulted in ‘permanent communication’ whereby political actors seek to dominate the political agenda every day through every available communication channel. Commentators have so far focused on a national level ‘permanent campaign’ (Nimmo 1999, Ornstein and Mann 2000, Lizza 2001, Sparrow and Turner 2001, Thurber 2002), but as a 24/7 communications channel the Internet may be the means by which a separate ‘local permanent campaign’ is evolving.

One of the key trends in recent UK general elections is that political parties are increasingly focusing their efforts on key target seats (Denver *et al.* 2002, Kavanagh and Butler 2005). Although a lot of local activity in these key seats is organised by professional campaigners provided by the party headquarters, it does highlight the type of resources required at local level. Between and during elections, candidates need to generate media coverage (Scammell 1995, Kavanagh 1995, Negrine and Lilleker 2003). Within this trend towards professionalism, campaigns increasingly use databases to help them target their message to key audiences (Kavanagh and Butler 2005). This requires therefore both the resources to provide and manage the equipment, and also the actual data to be collected. In both target and non-target seats there is a need to develop a pool of volunteers who can conduct activities such as canvassing, leaflet delivering and election day (Leonard and Mortimore 2001). Kavanagh and Butler (2005) found that, on average, candidates reported having 150-200 volunteers. MPs may look to the Internet as a means of delivering these tangible effects (Street 1992).

9.2 Why do MPs Have an Internet Presence?

9.2.1 Winning votes and the motivation to have a website

MPs believe that a website helps them win votes in two interrelated ways. First, indirectly a website may help win votes by promoting what an MP is doing on behalf of constituents. For example, table 9.1 shows that for respondents, the four most popular reasons for creating a website support the constituency role of an MP: to increase access to constituents; reach new audiences; raise their constituency profile; and generate feedback from constituents. Second, a substantial minority, 30%, of MPs responding to the survey appear influenced by the possible vote-winning possibilities of the Web. If these results are generalised to all MPs with a personal website, then approximately 120 MPs may, in part, have been influenced by the idea of using their website as a vote-winning tool. The indirect motive of raising awareness of their work on behalf of constituents (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006), appears more important than direct vote winning.

Political factors probably have the most effect on whether an MP views their website as a means of improving their electoral chances. The size of the party, and its likelihood of winning power seems to have an inverse effect. Respondents from the smallest of the three big parties, the Liberal Democrats, at 40%, are far more likely to be motivated by this factor than the Official Opposition (Conservatives) at 32%, and the Government (Labour) least likely at 27%. Surprisingly, marginality appears to have no influence but seniority does, with backbenchers, 32%, more likely than frontbenchers, 21%, to be motivated to have a website to win votes. Consistent with Norton (1994), those MPs who have least seniority or represent smaller parties may be more likely to view their website as a means of establishing their reputation with the electorate.

Table 9.1 MPs' motivations for creating a website

| Motivation | Percentage of MPs who were influenced by each motive |
|--|---|
| (1) To increase access to constituents | 107 (81%) |
| (2) To reach new audiences | 96 (72%) |
| (3) To raise my constituency profile | 92 (70%) |
| (4) To generate feedback from my constituents | 77 (58%) |
| (5) To promote my campaigns | 68 (51%) |
| (6) Many contemporary MPs have one | 48 (36%) |
| (7) To win votes | 40 (30%) |
| (8) It heralded a new type of politics | 36 (27%) |
| (9) To encourage people to support the Party | 28 (21%) |
| (9) Someone offered to set one up for me | 28 (21%) |
| (11) Other | 24 (18%) |
| (12) To improve internal communication with constituency Party members | 23 (17%) |
| (13) For the 2001 general election campaign | 20 (15%) |
| (14) To get email addresses for campaigning purposes | 14 (11%) |
| (15) The Party suggested I have one | 10 (8%) |
| (16) My constituents asked for one | 5 (4%) |

NB: Others include: To communicate 'what I do to constituents' (7); 'increase constituents access to me' (4); 'provide contact details' (2); 'good two-way communication' (2); 'record of political activity'; 'unprofessional not to'; 'criticised for not having a website'; 'to set an example'; 'it is indispensable'; 'suggested by agent'; 'keep up with the joneses'; 'an additional tool for communicating with constituents'; 'to reach constituents in a new way' (all one each).

The interviews support the findings of the survey, that MP's viewed their websites's electoral impact to be indirect by 'courting' constituents as part of the wider constituency role. Half (16) of those who were asked why they had a website identified a clear link with constituents. For example, Andrew Smith (Lab) noted *"I set it (his website) up about five years ago, conscious that with more and more people using the Internet, constituents would reasonably expect to be able to find information about their MP on the Web."* (Smith 2005) Of the other 16 respondents, most made reference to 'people' which might imply both constituents and non-constituents. Not one MP independently suggested that they saw their website as a vote winner. Whilst it might be argued that of course they would not admit to this, seven MPs were prepared to admit that they were following a bandwagon, an equally unflattering reason. Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that MPs were not motivated to have a website to win votes. This reflects the fact that MPs did not necessarily control who visited their website, implying a broader type of representation.

The interviews provide a wider insight into why MPs had a website. Four respondents suggested that resources were a factor, two had staff members with the requisite skills and two had IT skills themselves. Twelve admitted that they were following 'fashion', for example, Desmond Swayne (Con) noted *"Everyone else seemed to have one. So I bowed to the pressure."* (Swayne 2004) Fifteen indicated that they hoped to gain competitive advantage from having a website, for example, Chris Saunders noted *"It is a much cheaper way of contacting constituents."* (Saunders 2005) Five respondents had a clear vision of the impact they felt a website might have on the political process. For example, Judith Attar noted *"We aimed to de-mystify an MP's role, and to provide a more customer-oriented website, in order to encourage more people to contact and scrutinise us."* (Attar 2005) Only those who sought to gain competitive advantage might be motivated by the vote winning capabilities of websites.

9.2.2 Winning votes and the motivation to have an e-newsletter

As noted in chapter 6, none of the ten MPs with an e-newsletter appear motivated to provide one in order to win votes, and none of the MPs interviewed made any suggestion which remotely indicated that vote-winning was a factor. Rather, of key importance was their desire to reach constituents outwith of election campaigns. Therefore, one MP, Hywel Williams (Plaid Cymru) viewed his e-newsletter as a *"Non-political platform for a discussion of non-partisan issues."* (Williams 2005) However, it is worth pointing out that

the email correspondence with one MP did suggest that their regular e-newsletter did have a positive electoral impact, even if this was a not prime motive for providing it.

Yes, I think that I do significantly better among email readers than the general public, and given the narrow result and history of the seat, I think it may well have affected the outcome. If it reaches 2,200 homes at 2 people, minus say 25% who get it but instantly delete it or their spam guard prevents it getting through, that's maybe 3,300 readers. And, if as I suspect they voted 75% for me, that's an extra thousand or so votes compared with the average that would otherwise, have gone elsewhere. (Palmer 2005)

Palmer's calculations suggest that he believes that an e-newsletter delivers the number of votes normally associated with all of an MP's constituency work (Curtice and Steed 1997, Butler and Collins 2001). Palmer had been elected to a marginal seat in 1997, but by the time of the interview (2005) it was considered a safe seat. MPs are not primarily motivated to have an e-newsletter by the desire to win votes, but it may be a very useful by-product.

9.2.3 Winning votes and why MPs have a weblog

It is clear from the interviews, and content analysis outlined in chapter 7, that vote-winning does not appear to feature as a motive for why MPs had a weblog. Whilst weblogs are viewed as a means of bypassing the media, the audience for any direct message is a not necessarily an MP's constituents. Indeed of the seven blogs, only Sandra Gidley's and Shaun Woodward's seem to consistently target constituents. Instead, weblogs appear to increasingly develop an e-constituency which bears little resemblance to an MP's geographical constituency. Weblogs may be part of a national or global permanent campaign, but if they did have a positive effect on the voting behaviour of a small number of constituents this would be a happy, but unintended, bonus.

9.3 The Benefits of the Internet

Assessing whether an MP thinks their Internet presence has had an effect on their constituents' voting behaviour is not simply a matter of asking them whether they think it was a vote winner. Bolstering existing support and persuading voters to switch is a complex process, and in part requires an MP to believe that their online presence provided tangible benefits which might, in the long term, have an effect on a constituent's perception of them. Therefore, the local activity of MPs, how they communicate this and what effect it has on the perceptions of constituents, all help to shape the 'incumbency effect' (Krasno 1994).

9.3.1 The benefits gained from a website

Table 9.2 shows that the four most popular benefits of a website, respondents to the survey highlighted, refer to the constituency role, rather than any overt vote-winning element. This suggests that MPs perceived a website as a means of raising awareness of them in the constituency, but not that it was a persuasive tool which would generate votes directly. The evidence suggests that prior to the 2005 general election campaign, MPs did not think that having a website has necessarily improved their electoral prospects. Only 16% of survey respondents (the 10th most popular response) believed that a website helps them to gain votes. Only two political characteristics appeared to make some MPs rather than others believe that a website helps win votes. First, party clearly has an effect, with only 7% of Conservatives motivated by this, 17% of Labour, but 30% of Liberal Democrats. Second, seniority has an influence, with only 8% of frontbenchers motivated by this aspect, but 18% of backbenchers. Surprisingly, marginality has no effect at all. Norton (1994) might suggest those MPs who might be more dependent upon their own activities to raise their profile and win votes, Liberal Democrats and backbenchers, view their website as an alternative source of direct communication.

The fairly low figure of 16% suggests that some of the 30% who were motivated (see table 9.1), in part, to have a website as a means of winning votes were disappointed. However, securing votes is a complex process, and is in part influenced by the ability of politicians to promote their ideas, and here MPs' websites are more successful. Responses 1, 5, 8, and 9 might shape the perception of an MP and their party, which in turn may influence voting behaviour. Therefore, MPs do not necessarily believe that a website has delivered votes, but it does deliver on other factors which may affect the image, profile and status of an MP as part of a local permanent campaign.

MPs may be using their website to carve out a niche which potentially distinguishes them from both their opponents, and if need be their own party, supporting a move towards the individualist model of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963). The most popular benefits, 1, 2 and 3 are essentially non-partisan, whereas the partisan features are the eight and ninth most popular features. This does not necessarily mean that an MP's website outlines differences with party policy, rather the focus is on them, and what they have done for constituents. Therefore, MPs view their website as a personal rather than party-centric channel for attracting votes. For such MPs a website is evidence of a service provision

approach (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006), as opposed to a trustee or delegate approach.

Responses to the survey suggest that a website has been only of limited help in building up the tangible resources required for an effective election campaign. Certainly a fifth, 21%, of respondents believed that their website generated more media coverage, and this could help raise their profile with constituents, which in turn could help the ‘incumbency effect’. This is a useful, but not necessarily an election-winning benefit, and probably does not go as far as needed (Scammell 1995, Kavanagh 1995, Negrine and Lilleker 2003). In terms of building up an MP’s ‘war chest’, a website has very little effect, and indeed encouraging volunteers and securing donations are the two least popular responses. Only 2% of MPs suggest that they secured volunteers from their website, and even less, 1%, had used their website as a fundraising tool. A website, therefore, has not ‘levelled the playing field’ by generating the new resources required (Leonard and Mortimore 2001, Kavanagh and Butler 2005).

Table 9.2 The benefits accrued from having a personal website

| | |
|--|-----------|
| (1) Informs constituents of my policies and activities | 107 (80%) |
| (2) Supports my constituency role | 103 (77%) |
| (3) Promotes my constituency | 58 (43%) |
| (4) Identifies what constituents think | 35 (26%) |
| (5) Generates support for my policies | 33 (25%) |
| (6) Feedback helps develop my policies | 32 (24%) |
| (7) Generates media coverage | 28 (21%) |
| (8) Promotes my national Party | 27 (20%) |
| (9) Promotes my constituency Party | 24 (18%) |
| (10) Wins votes | 22 (16%) |
| (11) Secures constituents’ email addresses | 17 (13%) |
| (12) Encourages dialogue with non-constituents | 16 (12%) |
| (13) Supports election campaigns | 11 (8%) |
| (14) Other | 5 (4%) |
| (15) Secures volunteer help for the Party | 2 (2%) |
| (16) Secures financial donations for the Party | 1 (1%) |

NB: Other includes: It makes it easier for constituents to contact me (2); It helps build trust (1); Encourages dialogue with constituent (1); Helps inform the local community (1).

Turning their attention towards the next election campaign,⁽¹⁾ respondents were asked whether they felt their website will be a vote winner. This question is clearly speculative, but

it provides an indication of whether by the time of the next election, MPs expected their website to help their election campaign. Whereas only 16% (table 9.2) believe that their website has already helped them gain votes, 34% believe that it will, in the future, be a vote winner for them. This suggests that MPs feel their website will have a greater role to play in their future re-election prospects, than at the time the survey was conducted (2003). Although it must be noted that the highest response, Don't Know (47%), suggests that nearly half of MPs are uncertain as to what the impact of their website will be.

Two political characteristics do appear to have some effect on why some MPs are more likely than others to believe their website will be a vote winner. First, party, though it is the Conservatives in the survey, 50%, who are more likely to view the long-term electoral benefits of a website than Labour, 29%, and Liberal Democrat, 35%. Second, marginality has some effect, with 50% of marginal seats in the survey likely to believe that their website will be a vote winner, as opposed to 29% of near-marginals, and 36% of safe seats. This implies that it is in the tightest electoral contests a website is most likely to be used to help build incumbency by promoting an MP's constituency service.

9.4 The Use of the Internet in Election Campaigns ⁽²⁾

9.4.1 The 2001 General Election

Supporting the existing literature (Gibson and Ward 1998, Coleman 2001a, Coleman 2001b, Ward and Gibson 2003), the interviews confirm that the Internet had a very minimal impact upon their campaigns in the 2001 General Election campaign. Indeed, only four of those interviewed claimed to have used the Internet during their 2001 election campaign ⁽³⁾. Moreover, each of the four only mentioned the use of their website, suggesting that email was not considered a campaigning tool.

It is clear from the four interviewees who used their website in 2001 that it was, in effect, an electronic brochure (Jackson 2003). A typical response was from Ian Lucas (Lab) who stated *"In 2001 my website was very much like a leaflet, in that it introduced me to voters."* (Lucas 2004) Lembit Opik (Lib Dem) noted that *"I only used my website a bit, for example, it contained a lot of information about me, but I left it largely at that."* (Opik 2004) Therefore, a website was a static tool which might explain a bit about the MP, what campaigns they had been involved in and what they would do for constituents. As a result, an election website was, at best, a one-dimensional communication tool.

The explanation for why the Internet had a limited role clearly links to the use MPs make of it. However, the issue is not just a supply problem from MPs (though this was an undoubted issue), but also demand from constituents. One Labour MP noted that he “*Was a bit surprised at the low numbers of visitors.*” Again this supported existing literature concerning the limited number of visitors to MPs’ websites during an election (Gibson and Ward 1998, Coleman 2001a, McCarthy and Saxton 2001, Ward and Gibson 2003).

Several interviewees felt that the Internet had had little or no effect during the 2001 General Election campaign. For example, Gary Streeter (Cons) stated that “*In my constituency in the 2001 General Election the Internet had virtually no impact.*” (Streeter 2004) Supporting this Jane Griffiths (Lab) pointed out that “*In 2001 we probably did not use the Web as well as we might.*” (Griffiths 2005) However, contrasting this, there was a sense of those interviewed prior to the 2005 General Election, that the Internet would indeed play a more important role.

9.4.2 The Web and the 2005 General Election

Of the sixteen interviewed prior to the 2005 election, it is clear that there were grappling with a number of key questions regarding the possible use of the Internet. The very first question was whether they could use their existing website or not? The parliamentary rules state that an MP cannot campaign using Parliamentary funds/allowances. As a result, MPs applied a range of approaches to the registration, address and funding of their website. The vast majority funded their website out of their Members allowances, and tended to use the title MP on their url ⁽⁴⁾. During an election campaign MPs would have to ‘archive’ ⁽⁵⁾ their usual MPs’ site, and if they wanted to use the Internet, create a separate website funded by non-Parliamentary sources. Such MPs recognised that once Parliament was prorogued they would need to create a new website, which in all probability would make use of more campaigning features or content. For example, Chris Saunders, research assistant to Vincent Cable (Lib Dem), noted “*We will change the website from an MP’s site to a campaigning site. We are currently redesigning the website which will be more interactive, for example, making it easier for people to donate.*” (Saunders 2005) A much smaller number of MPs had addressed this issue earlier by having a website provided out of other funds, and not having MP in the url. One MP, at least, came up with their own solution of creating two separate websites concurrently, so that Derek Wyatt had both his Parliamentary website and his *Election 06* website. Whilst this might appear to be a matter of semantics, it was quite clearly a very important issue for MPs who did not want to abuse their expenses ⁽⁶⁾.

The second issue MPs considered was whether the Internet was actually going to be an important communication channel during an election. Only one respondent felt that the Internet would indeed be important. James Cook, researcher to Peter Atkinson (Cons), predicted *"I think it is going to be key. The advantage it gives an incumbent MP is in the run-up to the election...our opponents will, in effect, have to start from scratch."* (Cook 2004) It is clear that Cook felt that the value of the Internet, both their website and e-newsletter, was between election campaigns, and not necessarily during the campaign itself. Therefore, the value of the Internet might be supporting an 'incumbency effect' (Krasno 1994) by creating a local permanent campaign.

Contrary to Cook's view, at least four MPs stated that they felt the Internet would not be a very important tool at the 2005 General Election campaign. One of these, Chris Saunders, research assistant to Vince Cable (Lib Dem), felt that the Internet would not be as important in an election as he had originally expected (Saunders 2005). This suggests that for Saunders the Internet had promised more than it delivered in terms of changing the outcome of elections. Two MPs, Jim Fitzpatrick and Frank Field, were clear that the Internet had no role to play during an election because they felt it is not a partisan tool (Fitzpatrick 2004, Field 2004). Bob Laxton (Lab), despite being an MP who had embraced the Internet ⁽⁷⁾, did not think it would change how he campaigned during an election. He suggested that *"It is not my intention to change my modus operandi."* (Laxton 2004) By this Laxton meant that he was still going to rely on knocking on doors. Whilst the number of MPs surveyed who felt the Internet would not be important at all, outnumbered the number who believed it would, the silent majority were probably uncertain one way or the other.

Of those MPs who intended to use the Internet during the 2005 election, there was a general sense that it was their website which was the most important aspect of their Internet presence. Therefore, the main consideration was what content and features should be in their website. Some, such as Candy Atherton (Lab), intended to make few changes, and merely provide a modified version of their normal website (Atherton 2004). Taking a slightly more proactive approach, Tim Loughton (Cons) suggested that his website would include *"All my election literature, and I will probably have a thought for the day on national issues. In the past I have done a hotline where I have been available for half an hour, and I might do something similar online."* (Loughton 2004) Common to most of those seeking to have an election website was the electronic brochure approach, but some were also considering more

interactive applications. A website was viewed, within an election campaign, as a broadcast and not interpersonal communication channel (Kraut *et al.* 2003)

A number of MPs had learnt from their experience of using their website. For example, Lembit Opik (Lib Dem) was going to include more information in his 2005 General Election website than in 2001 (Opik 2004). This suggests a sense amongst some MPs that their website would have a slightly more important role in 2005, for example Gary Streeter (Cons) suggested that *“I expect it (the Internet) will be of more relevance to the next election.”* (Streeter 2004) At least two respondents, Derek Wyatt (Lab) and Judith Attar, researcher to Martin Linton (Lab), suggested that they felt regular updating of the website during an election campaign would be very important. This implied that the static electronic leaflets of the 2001 general election might be considered by MPs to be outdated by 2005.

9.4.3 Email and the 2005 General Election

If websites were still the main focus of MPs' attention, a large minority (with at least seven respondents out of 16) were considering what role email might play. Those who had e-newsletters were generally aware of their potential electoral impact, as a regular communication channel within the local permanent campaign. MPs recognised the importance of resources to using email effectively. For example, Lembit Opik, (Lib Dem) who had obviously given the issue some thought suggested that *“I would not rule out using email lists, but this requires a lot of people for the list. I am also not sure whether people want to receive information this way or whether they prefer printed materials.”* (Opik 2004) Conversely, Alan Whitehead (Lab) felt strongly that

For the next election campaign the key will be databases. In any reasonable MP's office you have databases of who contacts you. MPs should also have an email database, the principle is no different to other databases. As a result we always try to capture the email addresses of any of our correspondents. (Whitehead 2005)

The issue of an email list reflected a wider discussion of how an MP should campaign.

Between elections the focus on the use of outbound email has been on publicly available e-newsletters. However, there was a suggestion that prior to the 2005 election some MPs were considering whether a private email list of members, supporters and activists might be more useful. In other words, was email better fitted to persuade people how to vote, or to mobilise existing support? Certainly at least two MPs, Jim Fitzpatrick and Bob Laxton (both Labour), suggested that their efforts would be focused on looking at developing email lists of

members and activists (Fitzpatrick 2004, Laxton 2004). MPs were beginning to recognise that private email might fulfil the role of mobilising key groups and individuals (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Verba *et al.* 1995).

One very interesting example, which bucked the trend for greater consideration of using email during an election, was Steve Webb (Lib Dem). As noted in chapter 6, Webb had for a number of years run a consultation-based email list. However, Webb stated that

I actually do not plan to use the email list during the election campaign. For it to work it needs Labour and Conservative sorters, and if they felt I was using it for partisan reasons they might stop using it. I see it as a long-term relationship building exercise. I will probably before the election send out an email saying that this is the last email, and if re-elected I will start it again after the election ⁽⁸⁾ (Webb 2004)

Therefore, his email list might indeed be a potential vote winner as part of a local permanent campaign between elections, but it was not designed to be a partisan election campaign tool.

9.4.4 The role of the Internet during the 2005 General Election campaign

The actual experience of the sixteen respondents interviewed after the election campaign, suggests MPs' view of the role of the Internet during an election had shifted away from the Web towards email. Even allowing for the fact that those interviewed prior to the election might either have not been totally frank, or have fully thought through what they were going to do, the data does suggest that it is outbound email which may have the greatest role to play during an election campaign.

The first use of email, was as an inbound communication channel, though it is quite clear from most respondents that this was not necessarily from constituents. For example, David Liddington (Cons) noted

There were a significant number of emails coming in every day in the 2005 election that came to my campaign office. This was quite significantly different from the situation four years previously...The number of emails was weighted to those from various lobby groups rather than individual constituents, and, therefore it was a question of managing time each day to deal with these. It probably took an hour each day to check that people received responses." (Liddington 2005)

Inbound email, therefore added to a candidate's workload, but did not necessarily help them reach voters in their constituency directly.

The significant development in the Internet in 2005 over 2001 was the use of private email lists to mobilise activists, which was augmentory rather than transformative. Only one respondent, Nick Palmer (Lab), suggested that his publicly available e-newsletter helped him to reach potential voters (Palmer 2005). However, Palmer and six others used private email lists to mobilise local party members and supporters, their campaigns required (Leonard and Mortimore 2001). Typically, the candidate or their agent would email local activists, tell them what activities were planned and ask them to help as deliverers, canvassers or whatever else they were willing to do. The interviewees suggest that this helped in getting people out campaigning, and one Liberal Democrat target seat was able to get active support from Liberal Democrat sympathisers in neighbouring areas. Only one respondent, Nick Palmer (Lab) observed that he gained a few members and received a “couple of hundred pounds” donations as a result. However, he did point out that he did not actually seek to get members and “*Only mentioned donations in passing*” (Palmer 2005). For Palmer, the e-newsletter appears to have delivered a practical dividend, “*When the 2005 election started, I asked for non-party volunteers to help, and 50 people immediately came forward and formed the backbone of my leaflet distribution effort in many areas where party membership is not as strong as I would like.*” (Palmer 2005) This communication channel alone recruited approximately a third of the volunteers Palmer might need (Kavanagh and Butler 2005). Email lists were used to mobilise existing activists, providing some competitive advantage, but they were not widely used to attract new resources such as new members or campaign funds.

The greater use of email lists was a significant development during the 2005 election campaign, but their effect was limited probably because individual MPs lacked the resources of the political parties to manage effectively their lists (Jackson 2006c). The main impact of the use of private email lists has been to demonstrate what might be gained by their use in future elections. Three of the respondents who used such private email lists of their local party members suggested that this was something they wanted to do more of in the future. For example, one Labour MP observed that the “*Whole landscape is going to change, and by the next election I would like to have the email address of every member (of his constituency party).*” Certainly, the more sophisticated use of private email lists by several party headquarters shows what might be achieved (Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2006c). Private email lists had a very limited effect on the 2005 election campaign, but their impact may be in shaping the future development of Internet use by MPs.

Although probably playing a lesser role than email, MPs did give their website consideration during the 2005 election campaign. Indeed, there is a sense amongst respondents that there were more visitors to their website in 2005 than 2001. For example, Robert Key (Cons) observed that his election website received a lot of hits (Key 2006). However, the central question is what was the effect of such visits, and Graham Leadbetter, researcher to Angus Robertson (SNP), suggested that *“There is certainly more access to the website during election time, but I am not convinced that it was necessarily constituents visiting it, rather the media and academics.”* (Leadbetter 2005). The four weeks of an election campaign clearly led to a ‘spike’ in the number of visitors to MPs’ websites, but if the intended effect was to raise an MP’s/candidate’s profile in the constituency, it does not appear to have succeeded.

The impression given by respondents is that their website had a very limited effect, if at all, with five of the sixteen taking this view. None suggested it had played a significant role, and the remaining eight had no view at all. Indeed, Steve Pound (Lab) dismissed the role of the Internet during an election saying *“I made no use at all (of the website) as I was too busy campaigning.”* (Pound 2005) This suggests that Pound, an MP with a regularly updated website and an e-newsletter, viewed the Internet as an out-of-election communication channel. Robert Newman, researcher to Julie Morgan (Lab), explained why this might be the case *“We had a small campaign website which looked at local campaigns, national issues and Julie’s views on various national issues such as Iraq and Council Tax. However, the Internet had a fairly limited effect in that the main part of our campaign was door-to-door.”* Newman (2005) A website was used as a supplementary communication tool which helped provide information about an MP, and therefore did not appear to offer any competitive advantage. Unlike the party websites it was not used as a resource generating or mobilising tool (Jackson 2006c).

9.5 The Effect of the Internet in the Run-up to the 2005 General Election Campaign

9.5.1 Winning votes?

The question of whether the Internet was a vote-winner in 2005 requires an assessment of not just what the Internet delivered during the election campaign, but also in the months and years prior to the campaign. Indeed, the evidence above is that with the possible exception of email lists mobilising volunteers, MPs did not necessarily think that during the campaign itself the Internet delivered them much. Rather, the constituency work conducted by an MP between elections is likely to have more effect (Butler and Collins 2001). There is, therefore, an incumbency factor (Krasno 1994) from which active MPs with a high local profile might

benefit. The real value of the Internet as a vote-winning tool is more likely to be as part of a local permanent campaign, gradually raising their profile over a long period of time, through a ‘drip-drip’ approach. This section will seek to break down this effect, in the election run-up, into the three separate Internet channels studied.

9.5.2 Websites: a vote-winner?

There is limited data from MPs suggesting that a website may help them win votes, both between and during an election campaign. For example, supporting the ‘drip-drip’ approach Gary Streeter (Cons) observed “*I believe in the tyranny of the incumbent, and the fact I have a website may be another tool or weapon in maintaining this.*” (Streeter 2004) Only one MP, Andrew Miller (Lab) specifically identified his campaign website as a vote-winner, when he noted that

At the end of the 2001 General Election I received a lot of messages saying that people were influenced by the content of the website. One in particular stuck out, a constituent who wrote “I was not going to vote for you, but in view of the fact that you took time to send me an answer to my email on higher education funding, I still don’t completely agree with you, but you at least answered and no one else did. So you get my vote. (Miller 2005)

For Miller, the Web was not a campaigning tool, rather it facilitated communication via email from the constituent, where it does appear to have had an effect. As an easy to find form of contact, websites can facilitate contact between a constituent and their MP.

Whilst a website might not necessarily be a major vote-winner, several respondents believed that it could be a vote-loser if used poorly. Andrew Miller (Lab) suggested that “*The candidate that ignores the Web, does so at their own peril.*” (Miller 2005) The reasons for this is explained by Matt Rogerson, researcher to Liam Byrne (Lab), who notes that

Websites are now often the public face of a MP or a company. If a company website is poor, it gives an indication of the level of enthusiasm in general in the company. By adding something every day to our website, we are showing that Liam works every day for Hodge Hill, and that we are up to date.” (Rogerson 2006)

This supports Gibson and McAllister’s (2003) view that a good website is indicative of a well-organised candidate. The perception may be that a poor website suggests that an MP is not working on behalf of a constituency. As Jackson and Lilleker (2004) suggest, what matters is not just that an MP is working hard for their constituency, but that they are seen to

be working hard for their constituency. A website is another means of promoting what an MP is doing.

9.5.3 E-newsletters: a vote-winner?

The evidence above suggests that during an election campaign it is a private email list which delivers tangible results such as mobilising volunteers (Leonard and Mortimore 2001, Kavanagh and Butler 2005). However, whether such benefits deliver votes is probably an impossible point to prove. They do, however, clearly help provide a more active and high profile campaign, which is part of the background ‘noise’ of an election campaign. The real effect of e-newsletters on voting behaviour is probably between elections, as part of the local permanent campaign. Nick Palmer (Lab), the MP who has provided an e-newsletter for the longest time, rationalised it by noting *“I think that if you get a reasonable email from someone every week for years, you start to think of them as electronic friends - you may not always agree with them, but you are predisposed to trust them, and defend them against attack.”* (Palmer 2005) Steve Webb (Lib Dem), also one of the foremost proponents of this communication tool, took a very similar view that *“The list is probably a vote winner because so many people are not actually that interested in politics, and they might as well vote for someone who contacts them as anyone else.”* (Webb 2004) Whilst both MPs point out that vote-winning is not the main reason they use outbound email, it does provide useful electoral benefits by reaching less-partisan constituents. An e-newsletter is an effective means of making an MP appear a friendly, approachable human being with whom the subscriber builds a relationship.

9.5.4 Weblogs: a vote-winner?

The sample of respondents is very small, however, the content analysis outlined in chapter seven suggests that constituents are not the main audience of an MP’s weblog, therefore they are unlikely to be a vote-winner for most blogging MPs. For example, Austin Mitchell (Lab) noted that *“It (his weblog) was an added way of reaching people that was not very successful.”* (Mitchell 2006) He puts this down in part to the fact that he represented a safe seat where campaigning is different (Mitchell 2006). Sandra Gidley, the only blogging MP to represent a marginal seat, and one of only two who regularly targeted constituents, took a slightly different view. She suggested that *“It is possible that some people were swayed by the fact that I made the effort. I have a majority of 125, so if the weblog or my website helped persuade 75 people to vote for me then it has a significant impact.”* (Gidley 2006) On the whole, a weblog is probably not a vote-winner but if, and it is a big if, constituents

regularly visit their MP's weblog it may have the same effect as an e-newsletter or website in encouraging a constituent to be positive towards their MP.

9.6 The Impact of the Internet on Users' Voting Behaviour

This section seeks to assess whether accessing an MP's Internet presence has an impact on the users' voting behaviour. Given the possible different nature of visitors to a website and subscribers to an e-newsletter, the questions which sought to identify any effect on voting behaviour were slightly different. Visitors to the websites may not have viewed that website before the 2005 General Election, therefore it could not have affected their vote. However, having visited the website, it could influence how they might vote in the future. Whereas subscribers to an e-newsletter had been receiving it for some time, therefore, they were specifically asked whether it affected their vote at the 2005 General Election.

9.6.1 The effect of a website on voting behaviour

Given that two-thirds (table 8.2) of respondents were visiting an MP's website for the first time, it is of little surprise that a website has little or no effect on future voting behaviour. Combining the responses of 'it made no difference', 'cannot vote in the constituency' and 'no response' (table 9.3), suggests that for 78% of respondents the website appears to have had no effect. However, an MP might be heartened by the fact that nearly a fifth, 17%, of respondents are more likely to vote for them as a result of visiting their website. Of those for whom visiting a website may make them more likely to vote for the MP, there are a few trends. First, women are more likely to vote for Ian Lucas (28% as opposed to 15% of men) and Gary Streeter (22% as opposed to 6% of men) after visiting their website. However, men are more likely to vote for Annette Brooke (25% as opposed to 17% of women). There is no obvious explanation for this difference. Second, those who are most likely to be influenced to vote for the MP after visiting their website are all in the older age groups (45-65 and over). These three MPs' websites do not seem to persuade younger visitors to change their voting behaviour. As essentially a snapshot, a website has limited influence on the future voting behaviour of visitors. The value of a website is not, therefore, primarily as a vote winner.

Table 9.3 Impact on voting intentions of visitors to the MP's website

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Much more likely to vote for the MP | 3 (20%) | 7 (12%) | 1 (4%) | 11 (11%) |
| Slightly more likely to vote for the MP | 0 | 4 (7%) | 2 (7%) | 6 (6%) |
| Made no difference to my voting intention | 5 (33%) | 22 (38%) | 8 (30%) | 35 (35%) |
| Slightly less likely to vote for the MP | 0 | 1 (2%) | 0 | 1 (1%) |
| Much less likely to vote for the MP | 0 | 2 (4%) | 0 | 2 (2%) |
| I cannot vote in this constituency | 3 (20%) | 13 (22%) | 9 (33%) | 25 (25%) |
| None | 4 (27%) | 7 (12%) | 5 (19%) | 16 (16%) |
| Don't Know | 0 | 0 | 1 (4%) | 1 (1%) |

9.6.2 The effect of an e-newsletter on voting behaviour

There is evidence that the regular provision, over a period of time, of an e-newsletter can have an effect on voting behaviour, which suggests that contrary to Grieco (2002) the power of the sender has been enhanced. Given that the two surveys strongly suggest that an e-newsletter has a relationship building effect (see table 8.9), we can assume (though there is no direct evidence) that it has strengthened the resolve of existing supporters to vote for both Steve Webb and Nick Palmer. This implies that an e-newsletter acts as a 'reminder facility' (Ollier 1998), which might reinforce and strengthen the resolve of existing supporters to remain loyal to their MP. This was consistent with Jackson's (2006a) findings that political party headquarters felt that a publicly available regular e-newsletter helped maintain existing support. As a direct form of communication, an e-newsletter helps MPs bypass the media, promote their constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006) and thereby help persuade existing supporters to remain loyal.

However, the effect of an e-newsletter on voting behaviour is much more important than just 'firming up' existing support through 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger 1957), which seeks to assuage existing supporters that they have indeed made the right choice. Table 9.4 shows that evidence exists that subscribing to an e-newsletter has persuaded a significant minority to change their voting behaviour. Jackson (2006a) found that the party e-campaigners did not think that a publicly available e-newsletter was an effective tool at persuading undecided voters to vote for a party. Yet the data suggests that for at least two MPs, a well designed e-newsletter provided regularly over a period of time does win converts. Indeed, not only have these two e-newsletters won over undecided voters, they have even persuaded those who

consider themselves supporters of another party to switch. This suggests that an e-newsletter can win votes as part of constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). The 'incumbency effect' is shaped by an effective local permanent campaign which uses an e-newsletter to promote an MP's hard work on behalf of constituents.

An e-newsletter does appear to help gain votes and may explain why both Steve Webb and Nick Palmer have converted marginal seats they won in 1997 into safe seats by the 2005 General Election. Table 9.4 shows that approximately a quarter of subscribers to each MP switched their vote in the 2005 General Election as a result of receiving it. Steve Webb's email consultations encouraged a quarter of respondents, 25.4%, to change their vote. Nick Palmer's e-newsletter had very similar effect, with over a fifth of respondents, 23.3%, also changing their voting behaviour. Steve Webb may have gained slightly more converts through two inter-related factors. First, because he did not have to defend Government policy, and second that constituents may have responded more positively to the more interactive style he could adopt as a result. Overall, both MPs were able to persuade both floating voters, and those who normally voted for an opponent, to switch. If those subscribers who did not respond to the questionnaire display similar changes in voting behaviour as those that did respond, this suggests that both MPs' e-newsletters generated a sizeable personal vote. Whilst it would not necessarily be enough alone to turn a marginal into a safe seat, it clearly has helped both Steve Webb and Nick Palmer achieve this. The use of an e-newsletter has an impact on wider society, but one which is not covered by existing literature (Kraut *et al.* 1999, Castells, 2002, Gunther *et al.* 2003). For these two MPs, the effect of an e-newsletter is transformative, and so appears to be 'levelling the playing field' (Rheingold 1993, Stone 1996, Gibson and Ward 1997, Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2007).

Sir George Young (Cons) suggested (Wearden 2001) that an effective use of the Internet could be worth 5% of the constituency vote. The evidence from these two web-hosted surveys is that the email consultation list delivered Steve Webb at least 0.75% (226 votes) of his vote in 2005, and at least 0.3% (55 votes) of Nick Palmer's. Moreover, as these figures only refer to subscribers who responded the actual figure is likely to be higher⁽⁹⁾. Here is clear, and very specific, evidence of the cost-benefit analysis which the Internet offers MPs.

The extent of the impact on voting behaviour of e-newsletters has interesting implications for existing research. First, it strongly suggests that constituency service can have, as Butler and

Collins (2001) believe, a beneficial impact by developing a personal vote. Second, for these two MPs, the number of converts generated by the e-newsletter alone probably exceeds the total personal vote Butler and Collins (2001), and Curtice and Steed (1997) calculated that constituency activity generated. This suggests that for active constituency MPs the personal vote may be even greater than currently estimated. Third, the evidence suggests that as a communication channel, an e-newsletter, can be the means of both conducting and promoting constituency service. This strongly supports Jackson and Lilleker's (2004) view that not only do MPs need to be doing good locally, but they need to be seen to be actively doing it as well. As an alternative to e-democracy and the traditional Westminster model, e-representation, in the form of e-newsletters can develop a win-win situation. Constituents feel that they have a closer relationship with their MP, and in return this influences their voting behaviour. Changes in voting behaviour may be influenced by an evolving representative system, e-representation.

Whilst the switching of votes could be due to tactical voting, there is no evidence to support this, but nor is there any evidence to refute it. The quotes made by the two MPs and recorded earlier in 9.5.3 suggest that they believe many people are not highly partisan in their personal voting behaviour. Therefore, Webb and Palmer suggest, all voters need is a reasonable personal reason to switch their vote, which constituency service may provide. The comments made by some subscribers ⁽¹⁰⁾, (as outlined in 8.6.1) although not representative of all respondents, suggest that the reason for changes in allegiance may be more complex than this. Qualitative comments made by respondents suggest that the reason for any changes in voting behaviour is due to their belief that e-newsletters have helped reinforce the representative system. In other words, their views and opinions are being listened to. By strengthening the representative system Webb and Palmer are also benefiting from Krasno's (1994) 'incumbency effect'.

Table 9.4 In the recent General Election (2005) did receiving the e-newsletter change your vote?

| | Steve Webb (Lib Dem) | Nick Palmer (Lab) |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| No, I always voted for the Lib Dems/Lab | 350 (41.5%) | 75 (33%) |
| No, I have always voted for another Party | 173 (19.4%) | 33 (14.5%) |
| Yes, I was an undecided voter | 136 (15.3%) | 33 (14.5%) |
| Yes, I had usually voted for another Party | 90 (10.1%) | 20 (8.8%) |
| Cannot/did not vote in this constituency | 44 (4.9%) | 16 (7%) |
| Don't know | 51 (5.7%) | 29 (12.8%) |
| Missing | 46 (5.2%) | 21 (9.3%) |

9.7 Summary

MPs view their website as either a means of gaining competitive advantage, or follow their peers example. Only a few pioneers viewed their website in a different, more visionary light. Both the interviews and the web-hosted surveys suggest that websites have had little effect on vote-winning, though perhaps their absence would be considered unusual by Internet-savvy voters. However, the data from the interviews suggests that email, especially private email lists does have an impact, especially in mobilising volunteers. It is very likely that this use of email will grow. The web-hosted surveys of two e-newsletters suggests that they do have an effect, not just in bolstering existing support, but more importantly encouraging people to switch their vote. This effect, however, is the result of a local permanent campaign, rather than election campaign communications.

Footnotes

(1) At the time the survey was conducted the next general election had to be held no later than 3 years hence, though even then commentators expected it to be in the summer of 2005.

(2) The data for this section is based on thirty two interviews, sixteen conducted before the 2005 General Election campaign, and sixteen after the 2005 General Election campaign. Splitting the timing of interviews gave an insight to both their expectations of what role they thought their online presence would play, and an assessment, in hindsight, of what role did the Internet play.

Three MPs were standing down at the 2005 General Election and therefore were not asked their views on this question. The remaining ten interviewees were either not asked or had no opinion on the role of the Internet in an election campaign.

- (3) As not all MPs were directly asked this question, it is possible that a few more may have used the Internet in 2001, however, the overall sense of the seventeen interviews was that this was not a communication channel used during the 2001 General Election.
- (4) Uniform Resource Locator. This is a standard method for describing website addresses (Ollier 1998, p136).
- (5) Archiving in effect means that an MP closes their website down as a live and active site and it is not updated. Usually, the website can still be accessed via search engines, but some MPs in the interviews indicated that they actually took them off the World Wide Web as well.
- (6) Laxton was one of the first MPs to create a website, moreover, he experimented with the use of interactive features such as a discussion forum.
- (7) Details of each MP's expenses have been made publicly available since October 2004, and consequently this has led to some newspaper discussions about these. As a result many MPs are sensitive towards any accusation of excessive expenditure.
- (8) Which is exactly what he did at the beginning of the election in an email to his email list.
- (9) Though, as we can assume that those who responded are likely to be those who are most positive towards the e-newsletter, the 'switching' rate of subscribers who did not respond might not be as high.
- (10) With several of the questions, an 'Other, please specify' option existed. Whilst not representative, an analysis of these comments does add 'colour' and gives an insight into the perceptions of some respondents.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

10.1 Introduction

Chapter 10 is a summary of the thesis: how it compares to existing literature; a discussion of issues emerging from the data, in particular their implications for the way MPs operate and the effect on the concept of representation; and with what implications. The data assessed within this final chapter is viewed against the overall themes of the research which were outlined in the Introduction (1.1). These can be précised as:

- 1) The effect of the Internet on the campaigning abilities of MPs;
- 2) The relationship between the Internet presence of MPs and representation;
- 3) The importance of the Internet to how MPs communicate.

10.2 The Impact of the Internet on an MP's Workload

This section will consider whether the objectives (section 4.3) have been met.

10.2.1 The effect of a website on an MP's workload

Despite the reservations of some individual MPs, there is no evidence from the interview respondents that the existence of a website has significantly increased the workload of an MP or their staff. Most in the sample (except the few with an interest in IT) did not seek to increase their skills set, rather they hired webmasters or relied on their staff to manage the site. Moreover, the amount of time spent managing a website is only a few hours a week. The existence of a website has created some minor time efficiencies, but these do not appear to significantly increase the time available for an MP's various roles. Contrary to existing literature (Rush 1988, Forman and Baldwin 1999, Waller and Griddle 2002, Negrine and Lilleker 2003) the provision of a website does not appear to have necessarily increased the range of skills that professionalism implies. However, the few MPs who do appear to have noted an increase in their workload are those who are most enthusiastic towards the Web, and have become more professional at using ICT as a result. There is a divide in the impact on workload of a website which appears to reflect MPs' passion towards this technology.

10.2.2 The effect of inbound email on an MP's workload

Individual MPs have been developing systems for how they, and their staff, manage constituency email. No one approach dominates, rather MPs are flexible which is consistent with the experience of the U.S. Congress (Carter 1999). Those MPs who read incoming email are gaining grassroots intelligence which helps them understand what is happening in their constituency. However, email as an electronic communication, does not necessarily fit

easily with MPs' existing paper based office systems. As a result, some MPs end up duplicating both their electronic (email) and hard copy (letters) correspondence. Underpinning this organisational problem may be that email is not ideally suited for handling constituents' sensitive issues (Fallows 2002).

At least fourteen of the MPs interviewed identified that email has encouraged some constituents to contact them who might not have previously done so by letter. Although the nature of such new 'correspondents' differs from constituency to constituency, generally email has encouraged younger and more professional people to contact their MP for the first time. This suggests support for the research by Ward *et al.* (2003), and contrary to that of Norris (2001), Weber and Bergman (2001) and Lusoli and Ward (2004), that the existence of the Internet, and in particular the ease and convenience of using email, has increased low-level civic participation (Della Carpini 2000). Email has encouraged more constituents to contact their MP.

With more constituents who work in the professions contacting their MP, this has led to an occasional 'ping-pong' effect between an MP's office and emailers. At its best this helps develop a conversation, but at its worst makes MPs feel that some constituents become 'pests' taking up too much of their time. However, the overall result of this enhanced contact via email to an MP from a wider range of constituents, is to strengthen the ability of elected representatives to act as a 'safety valve' (Posner 2003). Email facilitates the opportunities for a constituent to have their say in the political process, through contacting a part of the political system, namely their MP.

The evidence of the impact of email on other office workers' workloads is that it has been negligible (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakola 2005), but the situation for MPs is very different. Both the questionnaire and interview samples suggest a concern that email will/is increase their communication workload. On the whole, MPs have not seen a significant increase in emails from constituents, but they are worried about the potential, or actual, increase of email from lobby groups. This concern about overload mirrors the evidence from America (Goldschmidt 2002, Sheffer 2003). Email has not reduced MPs workloads (Braun 1995), rather it has increased workload stresses (Hill 2005). The reason for this is that as a discrete group, MPs are among that minority of 'power emailers' (Fallows 2002) for whom email has increased their communication workload. The likely explanation is that unlike other workers, an MP cannot handle email by just replying to those they know (Tassabehji

and Vakola 2005), and that as representatives MP cannot control the amount of inbound email they receive.

10.2.3 The effect of an e-newsletter on an MP's workload

Although the lack of resources is one of the main reasons cited as to why more MPs have not adopted an e-newsletter, the evidence from those MPs with a regular e-newsletter is that it has not significantly increased their workload. However, there does appear to be a link between the amount of time and effort dedicated to an e-newsletter and their quality (and presumably effect), supporting the general guidance for providing an e-newsletter (Chaffey 2003). Those MPs whose e-newsletter is based on existing press releases appear to view their e-newsletter as merely a means of gaining competitive advantage. Whereas, those MPs who write a discrete e-newsletter have a wider perspective, which includes its value to the representative system. The amount of time spent on an e-newsletter may indicate the purpose of, and the importance, an MP ascribes to their e-newsletter.

10.2.4 The effect a weblog has on an MP's workload

Lack of time is one of the two main factors why MPs in the sample claimed they did not write a weblog. However, blogging MPs do not appear to view providing a blog as a major user of their time. Although it is clear that the more an MP is committed to a blog, the more time they tend to spend on it. Therefore, the time expended reflects the vision an MP has for a blog as a direct communication channel.

10.3 The Role of Individual MPs

10.3.1 The impact of a website on an MP's roles

The data suggests that a website helps an MP fulfil two of their roles (specialist and scrutiny), and to a much lesser extent the other two (partisan and constituency). This finding supports Jackson (2003), although it is worth noting that the responses for each of the four roles have increased. Yet, possibly the most interesting findings are to be found within the constituency role, where nearly two-thirds, 63%, of MPs use their website to provide local information. This local 'information portal' use of an MP's website is an adjunct to the constituency role, and encourages greater local civic participation (Della Carpini 2000).

One example acts as a possible model for wider adoption by other MPs. Robert Key's '*constituents only section*' enables him to provide a range of information tailored to their needs. Moreover, not only does this relate to the 'information portal' function, but he also

provides raw material on local issues, so that constituents can scrutinise them, and his performance. Most MPs use their websites as a broadcast communication channel, to provide information (Barnes 2001, Kraut *et al.* 2003), but when used, as by Key, to narrowcast a website enhances the MP-constituent relationship.

10.3.2 The impact of an e-newsletter on an MP's roles

E-newsletters are not used to promote the specialist role, but they do help with the scrutiny, partisan and constituency roles. Compared to the findings of Jackson (2006b) the use of all four roles (scrutiny, partisan, constituency, specialism) have increased, suggesting MPs are increasingly recognising the value of e-newsletters as a means of enhancing their control over the messages constituents receive.

The most notable use of an e-newsletter supports and enhances the constituency role. The promotion of local details and community services, especially in four out of the ten e-newsletters, suggests the development of a non-partisan 'information portal'. E-newsletters help some MPs to pull together and share out non-political information within the constituency. They are clearly not the only people doing this, but an e-newsletter makes it much easier for them to conduct this new role.

10.3.3 The impact of a weblog on an MP's roles

Weblogs are not used primarily to help with any of the four roles. In particular, there is no evidence that a weblog helps an MP fulfil his constituency role. Yet, the existing literature (Ferguson and Howell 2004, Auty 2005, Coleman 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006) starts from the assumption that constituents will access a weblog. Indeed, neither websites nor e-newsletters are the catalyst for Coleman's (2005) model of direct representation: rather he views weblogs as the most likely source of this new concept. In fact, it is clear from the data that MPs do not target constituents, rather a separate e-constituency has developed. For the six MPs whose blogs encourage comments, there is evidence of the existence in the blogosphere of a separate model of e-representation, based on interest not geography.

10.4 How MPs Communicate With Constituents

10.4.1 The impact of a website on how an MP exchanges information

MPs use their website as a means of reinforcing messages they have disseminated elsewhere, in particular to the media. It is clear from the surveys of MPs, content analysis and interviews that most MPs view their website as a means of reinforcing the message that they

work hard on behalf of constituents. By promoting their press releases and media coverage, MPs use their website both to bypass the media but also to try to influence the media's coverage of them. This latter finding supports an earlier suggestion made by Lipinski and Neddenriep (2002), that MPs would use their website to attract journalists to write favourable stories. The data supports existing research that MPs do not use their websites as a means of mobilising support (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). MPs use their websites, the sample suggests, as a semi-integrated communication channel which reinforces some messages, but they do not fully utilise the campaigning potential their websites offer them.

MPs recognise the structural components required for producing an effective website, supporting the existing literature (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). However, MPs are much less likely to use their website to mobilise support, which is consistent with the criticisms of existing literature that MPs' websites are too static (Walker 2000, Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Gibson *et al.* 2004, Ward and Lusoli 2005). The vast majority of websites are used as a monologue, but contrary to Kraut *et al.* (2003) a small minority of approximately 10% use their websites to encourage a dialogue. Approximately half of these use asymmetrical feedback as a means of gaining a competitive advantage. The other half use symmetrical communication, and may gain personal benefits, but their website appears to have a value to the wider representative system. Those MPs who noted that a website has increased their communication workload are likely to be those who use two-way communication.

10.4.2 The impact of an e-newsletter on how an MP exchanges information

Similar to their websites, MPs use their e-newsletters to reinforce messages made in other communication channels, though slightly fewer do this than for websites. An e-newsletter highlights what an MP is already doing on behalf of constituents. MPs view their e-newsletters as a means of bypassing the media so that they can have greater control over the the information constituents receive about them.

MPs' e-newsletters are even more likely than their websites to meet the structural requirements of the Best Practice model. Although, as with websites, there is scope for greater use of the mobilising potential of this channel, the existing literature merely suggests that e-newsletters are an interpersonal communication channel (Barnes 2001, Kraut *et al.* 2003, Chaffee 2003). The data suggests that this broad term needs to be refined. There are

two different approaches to the use of interactivity, with six e-newsletters being essentially one-way, but four clearly seeking feedback from subscribers. The former appear to view their e-newsletter as primarily a means of gaining competitive advantage, whereas the latter appear to view an e-newsletter as part of a model of e-representation.

10.4.3 The impact of a weblog on how an MP exchanges information

Whereas MPs use websites and e-newsletters as communication channels in their own right, and to reinforce messages elsewhere, MPs tend to use their weblog as solely a stand alone communication channel. An MP's weblog has its own narrow purpose: the conversation which it creates. Generally, a weblog is not used as an integrated communication channel: rather it encourages the development of a discrete community which discusses policy ideas of interest to it. Moreover, supporting Auty's (2005) findings, the use of humour and discussion of their personal lives outside of politics gives a greater sense of hinterland than websites and e-newsletters. Furthermore, a weblog encourages both vertical communication between an MP and visitors, but also horizontal conversations (Hale 2003) between visitors, and is so transforming MPs' communication (Kiesler 1997, Castells 2002). Through bypassing both the media and their own parties, MPs with a weblog may be moving towards an individualist model of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963), and hence weakening existing power relationships.

MPs' weblogs clearly meet the structural requirements of the Best Practice model, even more so than websites and e-newsletters. The content is very topical, but MPs do not use their blog as a campaigning tool. The real strength of MPs' weblogs is that they encourage dialogue, the point about them which has excited a number of commentators (Ferguson and Howell 2004, Coleman 2005, Ferguson and Griffiths 2006). However, it is worth noting that there is a downside to encouraging feedback, in that MPs weblogs are susceptible to attempts from opponents to 'hijack' them, a point noted by Ferguson and Griffiths (2006). Weblogs provide online citizens the opportunity to have their say.

10.5 The Users' Views

Maarek and Wolfsfeld (2003) sought to challenge the impact of online political communication by questioning who accesses politicians' online presence, why and with what effect. The data suggests that we have a much clearer idea of the answers, especially for e-newsletters, than Wolfsfeld and Maarek might have expected.

10.5.1 Do MPs' websites provide what constituents want?

The age and gender range of visitors to MPs' websites is consistent with the existing research on the profile of those who access the Internet (British Life and Internet Project 2002).

Although a variety of MPs' promotional activities encourage respondents to visit the website, the two most likely reasons to explain how a visitor heard of a website are beyond the control of MPs: family and friends; and/or through surfing the Internet. This supports Downes and Mui's (2000) view that politicians are following society and the commercial world in their use of the Internet. MPs' websites do not appear to be 'sticky' (Jackson 2003) in that they have not built up a loyal following of regular visitors; in fact most respondents were making their first visit to the website, which implies that contrary to existing literature a website does not enhance citizen engagement (Bimber 2001, Weber *et al.* 2003, Jennings and Zeitner 2003, Shah *et al.* 2005). With a small, and probably non-representative sample, any conclusions must take into account possible non-response errors (Filion 1975, Salont and Dillman 1994, Schonlan *et al.* 2002); however, the data does suggest that most respondents were making a rare visit to an MP's website. If this finding can be applied to all MPs with websites, it supports existing literature (Kraut *et al.* 2003) that they are not a means of developing long-term relationships.

The main reason why people visit these MPs websites is to gain information about their activities and policy views. Contrary to Coleman (2001d), but supporting Ward *et al.* (2005), the evidence suggests that visitors to MPs' websites want a monologue from the MP which explains their views, rather than a dialogue whereby visitors can give MPs their opinions. As a result, it appears that MPs websites do provide what visitors want.

10.5.2 Do MPs' e-newsletters provide what constituents want?

For subscribers to Webb and Palmer's e-newsletters there are clearly three reasons why they subscribe. The first is simply that they were asked to, as Gibson *et al.* (2002) suggest, receiving an e-stimulus has an effect. Second, as existing literature suggests, receiving information, both non-political and political, is very important to users (Blumler and McQuail 1968, Blumler and Brown 1972, Katz *et al.* 1973, McQuail 1987, James *et al.* 1995 Ohr and Schott 2001, Kaye and Johnson 2005, Jackson and Lilleker 2007). However, the third motivation adds to our understanding as subscribers do not want a one-sided relationship, rather one where they offer their ideas to their MP, and so take a more active role in political discourse. Steve Webb and Nick Palmer appear to be meeting their subscribers' needs essentially because they provide relevant information and seek to

encourage dialogue. The effect of this is that these two MPs' e-newsletters are encouraging greater civic engagement (Della Carpini 2000, Putnam 2000), because they have 'tapped into' the desire of some constituents to believe that they are being listened to by their elected representative.

The findings from Steve Webb's and Nick Palmer's subscribers also suggest significant developments to existing theory in terms of the effect of the Internet on the politically interested. First, supporting Jackson and Lilleker (2007), subscribers note that they have an opportunity to have their say. Second, subscribing to an e-newsletter clearly shapes the political views of at least two-thirds of subscribers. Third, at least a third of subscribers feel part of an online community, adding to users' sociability (Kraut *et al.* 1999, Castells 2002, Gunther *et al.* 2002) and suggesting that a parallel e-constituency is developing alongside the geographic constituency. Fourth, both Blumler and McQuail (1968) and Sadow (2000) suggest that it is only political activists who use any information received to help persuade others. Whilst those with the strongest association with a political party were more likely to use the information to help persuade others, a 'ripple effect' was also noted in the less politically active. By encouraging dialogue, e-newsletters have created a parallel e-constituency that has added to, and strengthened, the traditional constituent-MP relationship.

Existing literature (Sadow 2000, Coleman 2001d, Kaye and Johnson 2002, Johnson *et al.* 2002, Johnson 2003) has criticised politicians' Internet presence as essentially not delivering what their Internet users want. However, the evidence from Steve Webb's and Nick Palmer's subscribers is that their e-newsletters have met the needs of subscribers: indeed there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that they have exceeded subscribers' expectations. In part, this may be because the constituent-MP relationship, with these two MPs, may be closer than some of those evaluated by the research mentioned above. However, the evidence suggests the main reason is that these two MPs have used their e-newsletter to encourage a dialogue with constituents. The consequence of this has been to encourage citizen engagement with the e-newsletter acting as a social bond (Norris and Curtice 2004), which has helped develop online networks (Della Carpini 2000). Through the e-newsletter, constituents develop an affinity with their MP online, which results in them taking more of an interest in political discussion or activity.

10.5.3 Do MPs' weblogs provide what constituents want?

This research project did not collect the data required to answer this question, because

empirically this would have been a fruitless task. Given that there is limited evidence that constituents visit weblogs in large numbers, it would have been difficult to have generated sufficient data. Instead, the content analysis of the MPs' weblogs provides an insight into the behaviour of a separate e-constituency which share a cyberspace association, rather than a geographic relationship.

Whilst a definitive assessment cannot be made, the content analysis of the frequency and nature of comments provides an insight into some visitors' perceptions of each MP's weblog. Weblogs appear to improve information flows (Bimber 2001, Shah *et al.* 2005), and the comments on four of the weblogs suggest that many commenters were favourable towards them. Boris Johnson had the most favourable response, probably reflecting the fact that his weblog hosted an online community, many of whom were Conservative supporters. Richard Allan also generated a positive response from commenters, probably because he focused on reaching a like-minded audience interested in IT issues. Tom Watson's weblog generated favourable support, probably because a Labour Party elite used it to discuss a range of issues, consequently Watson's weblog acted as a 'focal point' (Drezener and Farrell 2004). Although Clive Soley did have problems with some commenters, there is a sense that most commenters appreciated that he specifically responded to points made to him. The response to Sandra Gidley's weblog was more mixed, with clearly some local political antagonism, but also comments of a supportive nature. Five of the blogs, unlike party-centred online communication (Lusoli and Ward 2004), encouraged some level of horizontal communication between commenters (Hale 2003). This facilitates the sharing of ideas amongst active participants (Kennedy 2004, Flatley 2005). The nature of both the vertical and horizontal communication implies the existence of a separate e-constituency.

Overall, the commenters to these blogs support the views of Baker and Green (2005) and Sunstein (2004) regarding the use of blogs to develop ideas, and those of Drezner and Farrell (2004) that they can act as focal points around which others congregate. The only weblog which did not generate a positive approach from commenters was Shaun Woodward's. This is probably because there were few posts from him, he does not appear to respond to comments made on his posts and his approach is more partisan in that he seeks to defend Government policy in a way that the other Labour MPs did not. Therefore, where there is a sense of a conversation taking place, be it vertical or horizontal, the response from commenters is generally positive, but where the approach appears to be one-way, vertical and partisan in nature, the response is far less positive.

10.6 The Internet as a Vote-winner

10.6.1 The effect of websites on MPs' re-election prospects

The main electoral benefit of a website for MPs is indirect, as a means of 'courting' constituents by facilitating awareness of their activities (Butler and Collins 2001).

Supporting existing literature, it was Liberal Democrat MPs who were most likely to note the possible vote-winning capabilities of their website (Halstead 2002, Jackson 2003, Ward and Gibson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). Whilst 34% of respondents to the MPs' website survey thought it would be a vote winner in 2005, it was not viewed either before or after the election to have helped deliver a 'war chest' of extra resources. This is contrary to the situation in America where a weaker party system encourages candidates to build up their own resources (Pupolo 2001, King 2002, Foot and Schneider 2002). Rather, MPs appear to recognise that elections are primarily won by the party label, but that a website in promoting their constituency activity can distinguish them from their opponents and, if required, their party. The electoral purpose of a website is not to develop the required campaigning resources (Leonard and Mortimore 2001, Kavanagh and Butler 2005), rather it indicates a move towards an individualist model of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963) by promoting constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). A website provides MPs with primarily intangible rather than tangible benefits (Street 1992). However, a poor website could potentially lose a candidate/MP more votes than a good one might win them. While a good website might suggest a well-organised campaigner (Gibson and McAllister 2003), a poor website could help create a negative image of an MP. If a website did influence voting behaviour, it would do so as part of a local 'permanent campaign' between elections, rather than during an election campaign.

The evidence from visitors to MPs' websites is that the act of visiting an MP's website has little impact on future voting behaviour. For at least 78% of respondents, visiting the website had no noticeable effect. This can, in large part, be explained by the fact that at least two-thirds of respondents were making their first (and we can assume in many cases, only) visit to the website. A single leaflet, newspaper article, or speech is unlikely to have a significant effect, and therefore, it is not a surprise that this is the case with a single website visit. However, for a small number of visitors (no more than 17%), visiting a website has had an effect, particularly women and older visitors. Visitors to websites do not, on the whole, appear to be swayed significantly by their visit to that website, but it is undoubtedly part of the communication mix which can have influence in the long term. A website helps augment

an MPs election campaign by transmitting information, but has very limited effect beyond this (Barnes 2001, Kraut *et al.* 2003).

10.6.2 The effect of email and e-newsletters on MPs' re-election prospects

By controlling their messages to constituents, respondents perceived that an e-newsletter has an effect on voting behaviour. Those respondents who encouraged dialogue seemed particularly likely to believe that an e-newsletter influenced voting behaviour. MPs interviewed suggested that the impact of an e-newsletter on voting behaviour was between elections, as part of a local permanent campaign. During the 2005 General Election campaign itself, e-newsletters to members of the public do not appear to have played much of a role: rather, they were replaced by the use of private email lists to local Party members. Where a website helped MPs promote their views during an election, email lists helped generate tangible benefits (Street 1992) by mobilising volunteers (Leonard and Mortimore 2001, Kavanagh and Bulter 2005), and therefore augmented an MP's campaign, but in a different way to websites. Given their success in 2005, it is quite likely that greater use of such email lists will be made at the next general election.

As a permanent campaigning channel used between elections to promote constituency service (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006), e-newsletters appear to have been an effective vote-winning tool. Moreover, the impact is more than the bolstering effect identified by Norton (2004): rather e-newsletters have been used to convert floating voters. Indeed, it is quite probable that the use of an e-newsletter, helped convert our two surveyed MPs' (Webb and Palmer) marginal seats in 1997 into safe seats by 2005. Certainly the two-web hosted surveys of e-newsletter subscribers strongly suggest that between a fifth and quarter of subscribers changed their vote as a result of receiving it. Moreover, this number of converts was comprised of both undecideds, and those who normally supported another party. Therefore, a number of constituents like to receive information via the Internet, engage with their MP through it, and admit to being influenced by an e-newsletter. The ability of an e-newsletter to convert voters suggests that existing estimates (of 500-1,000 votes) of the size of the personal vote may be too small (Curtice and Steed 1997, Butler and Collins 2001). For these two MPs the electoral effect of an e-newsletter was transformative (Kiesler 1997).

10.6.3 The effect of weblogs on an MP's re-election prospects

As constituents were not the main target audience for weblogs, it is highly unlikely that they

were a vote-winner. However, one MP, Linda Gilroy, felt that in conjunction with her website her weblog might have contributed to her overall victory in a very tight marginal. There might be a case for using weblogs to develop first a conversation, and then hopefully a relationship with a small number of constituents in a tight electoral contest, but this raises an issue whether the time could be better spent on some other activity.

10.7 Implications of the Findings

10.7.1 The impact on the Internet

In section 1.2.3 four characteristics of the Internet were identified, the data implies an evolution in our understanding in two of these characteristics. Whilst the data supports the idea that the Internet is user-led (Ollier 1998, Ward 2001), contrary to Grieco (2002) it has also been sender-led as well. Websites have proved to be an effective means for MPs to promote themselves, and e-newsletters (especially those which encourage dialogue) have been effective at building relationships and influencing subscribers voting behaviour. The Internet has created a win-win situation where both MPs and constituents have gained.

MPs do not use interactivity as a single universally applicable concept, rather it depends on the modality of the Internet we are studying. For most MPs', website interactivity has limited applicability as both MPs and their visitors focus on information provision. Interactivity within e-newsletters is divided into the asymmetrical, where what seems to matter is that an MP is seen to be interacting, and the symmetrical where MPs are interested in the results of such dialogue as well (Grunig and Hunt 1984). MPs are using weblogs to take this symmetrical form of dialogue one step further, so that a conversation becomes almost part of a journey. By creating such new online networks, MPs add to what is the Internet (Poster 1996), and enhance the sender-receiver relationship.

10.7.2 The development of online political communication

The data provides an insight into the nature of political communication online. Of the four roles of political communication which Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) identified, MPs' use of the Internet influences three. Of the three modalities studied, weblogs are the only one which regularly encourages the articulation of ideas. Posters and commenters use MPs' weblogs as a means of circulating new ideas (Sunstein 2004, Baker and Green 2005). Some MPs used their website to mobilise support behind their campaigns, but it was email lists and e-newsletters that were most successful in gaining volunteers, and influencing constituents voting behaviour. MPs use of all three modalities of the Internet primarily encouraged low

level citizen engagement through an enhanced interest in politics (Della Carpini 2000). In addition, the information portal role of some websites, and most e-newsletters, also encouraged constituents to get involved with a range of community activities (Della Carpini 2000, Putnam 2000). The Internet has added to political communication a means of generating more, and enhanced, participation.

Online political communication has created potential ‘wriggle room’ for MPs to create their own communication niche. Although MPs use their online presence to amplify the messages they have made in other media, they also appear very interested in the ability of their Internet presence as a means of bypassing the media, and possibly their own party, to communicate directly with constituents. MPs’ weblogs also communicate directly, but to a non-geographical grouping of global citizens. Within a post-modern campaigning era (Norris *et al.* 1999, Norris 2000), MPs are using the Internet as a means of direct communication. Whilst most MPs’ online communication is vertical and top-down (Norris 2002), there is some evidence of horizontal communication (Castells 2002, Hale 2003). The content analysis of weblogs suggests that several encourage, or have at least led to, communication between commenters and not just to the MP. The modality shapes whether an MP’s online presence has any effect. The impact of websites is essentially to inform visitors of an MP’s views and activities, and is therefore not an overtly persuasive tool. E-newsletters also inform, but they are also effective at enhancing the relationship between MP and constituent. An e-newsletter is an effective means of bolstering existing support (Jackson 2006a), but the evidence suggests that it can also encourage some voters to switch allegiance. Online political communication is now an important part of how MPs choose to communicate as part of a local permanent campaign (Blumenthal 1980, Ornstein and Mann 2000).

10.7.3 The impact of MPs’ Internet presence on society

The evidence supports Kiesler’s (1997) view that a technology can have both a quantitative and qualitative impact, depending on which modality is studied. Websites are clearly augmentory in that they make it easier for MPs to impart information to constituents. For those MPs seeking competitive advantage an e-newsletter is augmentory, enabling them to impart information more efficiently and effectively. However, a small number of pioneering MPs use their e-newsletter as a means of enhancing representation, and interestingly as a result these appear to gain most competitive advantage. Those MPs whose weblog encourages comments are transformative because they develop ideas and policies with individual citizens’ outwith of geographical boundaries. Therefore, a weblog becomes a hub

for discussion around certain issues. For most MPs, the effect of the Internet has been augmentory, but the experience of a small number suggests that certain modalities of the Internet may become transformative (Kiesler 1997), making representation less territorial in nature.

Contrary to the assumption that professionalism (Lilleker and Negrine 2003, Negrine 2007) should be encouraging MPs to learn new skills sets, the data suggests that Downes and Mui (2000) are correct in suggesting that the political sphere is reacting to other actors' use of the Internet. However, this does not mean that MPs' use of the Internet has not helped shape society. For example, the ability of all three modalities of the Internet studied to enhance the sharing of information, supports the optimism of some commentators views of the computer (Abramson *et al.* 1988, Downing 1989). The Internet enables MPs to provide information flows to constituents that is not necessarily controlled by party elites (Zittel 2002). Although MPs are a part of the political elite, this potential bypassing of party elites represents a step towards the ideal outlined by Castells (2002) and Van Dijk (2006).

Whilst the arguments made in section 2.3.1 suggests that diffusion theory does not provide a useful analytical tool for understanding MPs' use of the Internet, the analysis of commenters behaviour supports Ayres' (1999) view that a weblog is diffusing ideas amongst individuals. Moreover, e-newsletters and weblogs appear to be encouraging the development of online political communities (Rheingold 1993, Katz and Aspden 1997, Castells 2002). In one aspect of the Internet's effect on society, MPs appear to be at variance with others. Email has not increased the communications workload of most office workers (Fallows 2002, Tassabehji and Vakole 2005), but the opposite is the case with MPs. This suggests that, as a group, MPs are that section of 'power emailers' for whom email has increased their workload (Fallows 2002). In terms of their use of websites MPs are following the example of others, but with their use of weblogs MPs are providing online leadership.

The introduction and development of new technologies reflect power relationships (Winner 1985, Braun 1995, Rogers 1995, Street 2001, Johnson 2006). MPs operate within a strong party system which limits their decision making influence (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). MPs have, until the post-modern era (Norris *et al.* 1999, Norris 2000), had to rely heavily on gatekeepers within both the media and their own parties for communication opportunities. The Internet, by enabling direct communication, is beginning to level the playing field by creating new communication opportunities which MPs control, and which bypass traditional

gatekeepers (Rheingold 1993, Stone 1996, Gibson and Ward 1998, Bimber 1999a, Jackson 2006a, Jackson 2007). As Norton (1994) suggested, it is those MPs who are least established that have been most likely to utilise the different modalities of the Internet: younger, more recently elected, female, less senior and in marginal seats. As a consequence the Internet has given MPs 'wriggle room' so that they can seek to distinguish themselves from other political actors, and so appear to have taken a step towards the individualist model of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963). The effect on those constituents/citizens who tap into this source of communication is likely to enhance their view of that individual MP.

The digital divide suggests that certain sections of society are more likely to be online than others (Norris 2001). Further, the literature suggests that access to online political communication deepens the linkage between politicians and citizens of those already interested in politics (Norris 2001, Weber and Bergman 2001, Gibson *et al.* 2003b, Lusoli and Ward 2004). Certainly the evidence from e-newsletter subscribers supports this. However, one study (Gibson *et al.* 2002) suggested that online political communication reached a new audience, namely a small group of 15-24 year olds who had not been interested in politics before. The data suggests that the range of those getting involved in politics for the first time is expanding because of the existence of the Internet. MPs believe that email is increasing participation to a number who have not contacted their MP before. Such new participants include younger constituents, those living in remote parts of constituencies and some from the more socio-economically depressed areas within constituencies. This last group, although relative to each constituency and not an absolute measure, is contrary to most existing literature (Norris 2001, Gibson *et al.* 2002). Email may be helping to break down the democratic divide (Tolbert *et al.* 2002).

When considering the interaction of new technologies with politics and society, the literature is implicitly addressing the question of which has the greater impact: technology on politics and society or vice versa (Street 1992, Rogers 1995, Buckstein 1997, Winston 1998, Downes and Mui 2000, Agre 2002, Johnston 2006). The use of MPs websites, email and e-newsletters, though not weblogs, can be explained within the context of a growing information based society (Boheme and Stehr 1986). Existing political interests also shape the use of the Internet by MPs (Braun 1995, Street 2001). For example, Government backbench MPs' e-newsletters are more likely to information based probably to help explain and defend the Government's position. Whereas opposition MPs' e-newsletters do not need to be so defensive, and so can focus more on building interactive relationships. Conversely,

MPs Internet presence may be affecting society and politics. The data suggests that the three modalities appear to meet different needs which citizens want from the political process. Websites largely encourage the sharing of information, e-newsletters promote information, but also encourage discussion, and weblogs facilitate wider discussion. The Internet may be enhancing the ability of citizens to get involved with politics at a range of different levels from the comfort of their own PC, at home, work or school. At the same time, the content of website, e-newsletters and weblogs may be encouraging a less partisan approach to politics. As a result, this may be challenging existing political interests, and helping to shape new ones based on either the constituency or commonality around ideas/interests. The Internet is shaping how MPs interface with citizens, constituents and other political actors.

10.7.4 MPs

The Internet, and in particular websites and e-newsletters, has helped to shape the evolution of the constituency role through use of the information portal concept. This supports Ward and Lusoli's (2005) view that the Internet has helped to modernise the representative role. More specifically, the data supports Hoff's (2004) contention that we can witness the 'contours' of a new role for MPs as 'information agents'. Hoff did not study the UK, but use by some MPs of their website or e-newsletter as a local 'information portal' supports his contention. Websites and e-newsletters have been used by some MPs to add new aspects to their constituency service role (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006).

As stated in section 4.5.2, MPs have adapted to the Internet in a number of different ways, and Figure 10.1 identifies a typology with four main characteristics of MPs use of the Internet. The *technophobes*, although not specifically interviewed, account for probably 30% of MPs (Ward and Lusoli's 2005). Although they automatically have an email address, they have not sought to apply resources proactively to use the Internet. We can assume that they either have a personal propensity against using new technologies, or they have conducted a cost-benefit analysis suggesting they can better spend their finite resources elsewhere. The *bandwagoners* follow the example of others, in order not to get left behind. Table 9.1 shows that over a third (36%) created a website because other MPs had one. For *bandwagoners* the key dimensions affecting their decision appear to be Resources (who is going to do it), and Attitudes (why have an online presence). Because of the resources required there is no evidence that any e-newsletters are created by *bandwagoners*, though at least one weblog appears to be. Whilst the *technophobes* are equivalent to Rogers's (1995) *laggards*, and the *bandwagoners* are consistent with the *early-* and *late-majority*, the remaining two

categorisations are unique to MPs. The third category, represents probably 25-30% of MPs, the *magpies* seek to use any new communication tool as a means of gaining competitive advantage (Lilleker *et al.* 2006). The key dimensions for this group are Activities (can they use it to control their message and how will they use it) and Attitudes (what practical impact has the Internet had in gaining an advantage). Resources are not an issue if a cost-benefit analysis of Activities and Attitudes suggest the Internet is an appropriate channel. The last category, the *pioneers* represents 5-10% of MPs, who champion the Internet not just for their own communication and campaigning benefits, but also as a means of enhancing the democratic process. Interestingly, this last group may actually benefit from the most competitive advantage precisely because some constituents like the idea of e-representation.

Figure 10.1 Characteristics of MPs and the Internet

| Category | Key Dimension | Internet enthusiasm | Impact of Internet presence |
|---------------------|---|---------------------|--|
| Technophobes | The opportunity cost of Resources is not outweighed by their negative Attitudes. | Cold | Alienates Internet-literate constituents. |
| Bandwagoners | Attitudes (motive) outweighs the Resources required. | Lukewarm | Provides the level of information many constituents want. |
| Magpies | Activities (control of messages) influences Attitudes (practical benefits). | Warm | Bypass gatekeepers Enhances MP-constituent relationship. Leads to some Resource benefits. |
| Pioneers | Activities (Internet is used in innovative ways), which leads to positive Attitudes (high level of impact). | Hot | Enhances MP-constituent relationship. Creates e-representation. Influences voting behaviour. |

An MP's Internet presence has influenced the general trend towards professionalism identified in section 1.5 (King 1981, Rush 1988, Waller and Griddle 2002, Cairney 2007). MPs, or more often their staff, have learnt new skills to manage their online presence (Negrine and Lilleker 2003, Negrine 2007). These new skills have not yet led to workload efficiencies, in fact email, e-newsletters and weblogs have increased MPs' workloads, perhaps reducing further the time they spend in the Chamber of the House. The Internet does not appear to have reversed Power's (2000) concern that the growing importance of the constituency role might mean that MPs neglect their other activities. On the contrary, the Internet appears to be encouraging greater emphasis on constituency activity. The Internet has not lead to sufficient efficiency savings so that MPs can spend more time on their other

duties. However, those MPs who meet the Best Practice model of using the Internet have gained in their ability to communicate directly with constituents. By enabling MPs to bypass gatekeepers such as their own parties and the media, the Internet, as Ward and Lusoli (2005) suggest allows constituents to view MPs in their own right, and not just as cogs in the party machinery. The Internet, therefore, has enhanced an MPs ability to promote their own individualism and distinctiveness.

The debate over the relationship between elector and elected has since the eighteenth century (Rush 2001) been between trustees or delegates, but MPs' experience of the Internet suggests that this debate has moved on. MPs' use of the Internet does not support the delegate model. Although some MPs have used feedback mechanisms in their website and e-newsletters, the very limited numbers suggest that MPs have not sought to identify constituents' views and vote accordingly (Arblaster 2002). There is some evidence to support a slight return to the trustee role, in that MPs' websites, e-newsletters and especially weblogs include discussion of national level issues (Pickles 1971), precisely because the Internet enables MPs to bypass party control. However, the main effect of the Internet has been to support an emerging alternative of constituency service provision (Butler and Collins 2001, Lilleker 2006). MPs' use of websites, email and e-newsletters (but not weblogs) have all consistently sought to represent all constituents, and not just the interests of specific groups or the nation as a whole. As a result, the tone of MPs' Internet communication is frequently non-partisan, and with the information portal role, non-political as well. The Internet is encouraging a dual approach. The ability to have greater control on their communication has acted as a 'shot in the arm' to the trustee role, and the Internet, especially weblogs, has enabled MPs to have their views on national issues heard. At the same time, MPs communication to, and relationship with, constituents is pushing the representative system towards one increasingly based on promoting constituency service.

The existence of the Internet has added to the debate regarding direct or representative democracy. On one side is the belief that the Internet will enhance representative democracy (Coleman 2001d, Ward and Lusoli 2005), on the other that it will transform it into direct e-democracy (Rheingold 1993, Budge 1996, Posner 2003). The data of how MPs use the Internet suggests that an alternative, e-representation, exists between these two approaches. The impact of the Internet on how MPs communicate is creating a new architecture of representation with both a territorial axis and an issue axis. This is not necessarily a new development, and it has probably always existed, but now a citizen can hear, and be heard by,

kindred voices via the computer keyboard. It enables MPs to pick up on issues which might have otherwise escaped them. Moreover, it allows voters who feel disenfranchised because they live in a safe seat, or because their party does not 'talk' to them, to believe that they now have a voice.

The framework outlined in section 3.2.2 helps explain whether MP's use of the Internet has created a movement towards e-representation. The evidence from both MPs and visitors is that a website has been augmentory by slightly enhancing representation, and that there is no obvious online constituency. MPs e-newsletters have the potential to transform representation, but of our content analysis sample only the four who took a less partisan approach appear to develop an e-constituency. Analysis of the subscribers to Webb and Palmer's e-newsletters suggest evidence of a parallel e-constituency of constituents who live in the territory of each MP, but also enjoy being part of an electronic community. This supports Coleman's (2005) idea of direct representation based on permanent communication. Although not always explicit, these e-newsletters provide the opportunity for feedback from e-constituents, and sometimes this develops into a conversation. MPs weblogs are creating a different form of e-representation. Visitors to MPs' weblogs tend not to have a geographical link with the MP (Rehfeld 2005): rather the link is one of interest. Therefore, a separate e-constituency exists, and a weblog provides an opportunity for visitors to comment and engage in a debate with both the MP and other visitors. This adds to Coleman's (2005) concept of direct representation because he assumed geographic representation. The number of MPs providing such e-newsletters and weblogs is small (about ten in total at the time of the data collection), but they provide two new prototype models of e-representation. E-newsletters can lead to a strengthening of the existing representative system by adding a parallel e-constituency, but weblogs challenge the existing representative system by creating a separate, non-geographical e-constituency which only exists in the blogosphere.

10.7.5 Future trends

The impact of the Internet on political communication may be analogous to 'the acorn that grows into a mighty oak'. At present there are probably 50 MPs who can be classified as pioneers, but they may represent a bottom-up pressure for change in how the political system communicates. For example, in 2006 Steve Webb was made responsible for writing the Liberal Democrat's Manifesto for the next General Election. He used his e-newsletter experience to innovate by introducing an online Manifesto consultation process. As these champions achieve influential positions within either their party, parliament or government

they are likely to utilise the Internet in these roles. Therefore, the use of the Internet by MPs may have a long-term influence on the development of political communication within the UK political system.

When the World Wide Web was introduced into politics in the 1990s, a number of commentators felt that its interactive nature might transform politics. The underlying sense of most empirical research since then has been that the Internet has not lived up to its revolutionary billing. However, the debate about the Internet has now entered a new phase, where again the discussion is about the possible transformation of politics by the Internet. O'Reilly (2005) suggested that Web 1.0 is being replaced by Web 2.0. The implication is that Web 1.0 was essentially content based (O'Reilly 2005), and Web 2.0 by contrast stresses interaction through community participation (Barsky 2006, Chaffey *et al.* 2006). As a concept, Web 2.0 includes new Internet modalities such as flickr, twitter, rss, weblogs and social networking websites. In particular, some well-known politicians have shown an interest in social media sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Bebo (Jackson, 2008). However, Web 2.0 implies more than just technological change as Web 1.0 includes the potential for much greater interactivity (Benyon-Davies 2004). Rather, Web 2.0 is also a state of mind that seeks to encourage social interaction (O'Reilly 2005). Within this conceptual framework, the evidence suggests that most MPs's use of a website is within Web 1.0, but that of e-newsletters and weblogs is within Web 2.0. This could presage the threshold of a shift, as the pioneers lead the community of MPs into uncharted, more interactive, territory online.

INTERVIEWS

Richard Allan 5/12/05
Candy Atherton MP 7/12/04
Judith Attar 7/1/05 (research assistant to Martin Linton MP)
Anne Begg MP 2/12/04
Andrew Bennett MP 1/12/04
James Cook, 19/11/04 (research assistant to Peter Atkinson MP)
Frank Field MP 7/12/04
Jim Fitzpatrick MP 29/11/04
Paul Flynn MP 8/12/04
Neil Gerrard MP 16/12/04
Sandra Gidley MP 3/5/06
Chris Grayling MP 16/1/06
Jane Griffiths MP 5/1/05
Tom Harris MP 28/6/05
Charles Hendry MP 16/1/06
Nigel Jones MP 8/12/04
Robert Key, MP, 14/12/05
Norman Lamb MP 2/5/06
Bob Laxton MP 16/12/04
Graham Leadbetter 15/12/05 (research assistant to Angus Robertson MP)
David Liddington MP 8/12/05
Tim Loughton MP 16/12/04
Ian Lucas MP 15/12/04
Andrew May 22/5/06 (research assistant to Annette Brooke MP)
Andrew Miller MP 2/11/05
Austin Mitchell MP 17/1/06
Chris Mole MP 22/6/05
Robert Newman 14/12/05 (research assistant to Julie Morgan MP)
Mark Oaten MP 19/12/05
Lembit Opik MP 13/12/04
Nick Palmer MP 11/6/06
Kerry Pollard MP 10/12/04
Steve Pound MP 12/12/05
Gordon Prentice MP 20/1/06
Matt Rogerson 24/3/06 (research assistant to Liam Byrne MP)
Chris Saunders 28/1/05 (research assistant to Vincent Cable MP)
Andrew Smith MP 13/12/04
Lord Clive Soley, 28/4/06
Gary Streeter MP 4/7/03
Desmond Swayne MP 15/12/04
Steve Webb MP 10/12/04
Alan Whitehead MP 6/1/05
Hywel Williams MP 3/2/05
Derek Wyatt MP 24/11/04

APPENDICES

Appendix A (Questionnaire sent to MPs 2002)

The Impact of Email on Constituency Work Survey

Q1. On average how many constituency emails do you receive each week?

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| Less than 100 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 101-200 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 201-300 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 301-400 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 401 and over | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q2. Has the use of email led to a comparable reduction in your constituency post mailbag?

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q3. In percentage terms, on average, how many of your emails are from non-constituents?

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| Less than 10% | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11%-20% | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21%-30% | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31%-40% | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 41%-50% | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 51% and over | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q4. Have you received co-ordinated campaign materials via email from pressure groups?

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q5. How well do you feel that you are coping with the volume of email you receive?

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Very well | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reasonably well | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Adequately | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not very well | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Badly – being swamped | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q6. Do you have the resources and skills to make best use of email?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q7 Have you or your staff received any training on how to use email effectively?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q8. Has email helped you provide a better service to constituents?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q9. Do you think that compared to posted letters, email creates an expectation among your constituents of a speedier reply from you?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q10. When you receive an email from a constituent do you normally:

- Email an acknowledgement and post a full answer ☐
Post an acknowledgement and post a full answer ☐
Email an acknowledgement and email a full answer ☐
Either email or post depending on which is appropriate ☐
Other (please specify).....

Q11. At the bottom of your emails do you use 'signature files' to promote your latest campaigns, websites etc?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q12. Do you actively collect constituents' email addresses for later campaign purposes?

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Q13. Do you proactively send emails to constituents on any of the following:
(tick more than one box if appropriate)**

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Changes to your website | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your speeches/press releases | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Details of your campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A regular newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Party policies | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Election campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Appeals for help | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (please specify)..... | |

Q14. Which of the following would help you better serve your constituents through email?(tick more than one box if appropriate)

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Training | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Better equipment | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Filtering software | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Specialist support staff | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Online surgeries | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sending out regular mailings | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (please specify)..... | |

Thank you for your help and co-operation.

Appendix B (Questionnaire sent to MPs 2003)

MPs website questionnaire

Q1. Do you have your own website dedicated to your role as an MP?

Yes ☐
No ☐

If yes, please go to Q5.

Q2. Why do you not have your own dedicated website? (tick more than one answer if appropriate)

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| My constituents are unlikely to access it | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Insufficient support staff | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Can better use my limited resources elsewhere | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Will not win votes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No one has suggested it | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't want to open up two-way communications with constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| It's a gimmick | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q3. What, if anything would persuade you to have a dedicated website? (tick more than one answer if appropriate)

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Demand from my constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The existence of appropriate support staff | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My resources are increased | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If I thought it would win votes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Someone offers to do it for me | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To enhance my constituents access to me | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Nothing | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q4. Are you likely to set up your own dedicated website in the future?

Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

If yes, is this likely to be:

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| In the next six months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| In the next twelve months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Within two years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For the next general election | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| When I have time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

If you don't have your own dedicated website, the questions are now finished. Thank you for answering them.

Nigel Jackson, Centre for Public Communication Research
Bournemouth University

Q5. When did you set up your dedicated website?

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Within the last 6 months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Within the last 12 months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| One-two years ago | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Two-three years ago | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than three years ago | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q6. Why did you set up your own dedicated website? (tick more than one box if appropriate)

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1) Many contemporary MPs have one | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) For the 2001 general election campaign | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) To generate feedback from my constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) My constituents asked for one | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) The Party suggested that I have one | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) It heralded a new type of politics | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) To improve internal communication with constituency Party members | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8) To encourage people to support the Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9) To gain email addresses for campaigning purposes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10)To promote my campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11)To raise my constituency profile | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12)To reach new audiences | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13)To win votes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14)To increase access to constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15)Someone offered to set one up for me | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16)Other..... | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q7. What was the single most important reason why you set up your own dedicated website?
(please select one number from the above list)

.....

Q8. What do you use your dedicated website for? (tick more than one if appropriate)

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1) Publishing my speeches | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) Publishing my diary dates | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) Promoting my contact details | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) Promoting my press releases | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) Providing a biography of myself | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) Providing photographs of myself | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) Promoting my campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8) Part of an election campaign | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9) Explaining the Party's policies | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10)Explaining my own personal policies | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11)Explaining my voting record | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12)Encouraging feedback from constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13)Encouraging feedback from non-constituents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14)Other..... | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q9. What is the single most important reason why you use your dedicated website? (please
select one number from the above list)

.....

Q10. Why do you think your constituents access your dedicated website?

- To ascertain my policies ☐
- To find out surgery details ☐
- To find out about my local campaigns ☐
- To find out about my national campaigns ☐
- To find out about my biography ☐
- To support my campaigns ☐
- To volunteer to help the Party ☐
- To get my contact details ☐
- For constituency casework ☐
- To offer their feedback on national political events ☐
- To offer their feedback on local political events ☐
- To take part in a online discussion group/opinion poll ☐
- Other.....

Q11. What benefits has your website given you? (tick more than one box if appropriate)

- Generates media coverage ☐
- Informs constituents of my policies and activities ☐
- Identifies what constituents think ☐
- Feedback helps develop my policies ☐
- Generates support for my campaigns ☐
- Secures financial donations for the Party ☐
- Secures volunteer help for the Party ☐
- Secures constituents email addresses ☐
- Wins votes ☐
- Supports my constituency role ☐
- Promotes my constituency ☐
- Promotes my constituency Party ☐
- Promotes my national Party ☐
- Encourages dialogue with non-constituents ☐
- Supports election campaigns ☐
- Other.....

Q12. How do you encourage people to visit your dedicated website? (tick more than one box if appropriate)

- Registered once on a search engine ☐
- Frequently re-register on a search engine ☐
- All my stationery includes my website address ☐
- All my promotional material includes my website address ☐
- Reciprocal links with other websites ☐
- Encourage visitors to recommend your site to a friend ☐
- Use of signature files on all my emails ☐
- Send out regular emails promoting the website ☐
- Press released launch of the website ☐
- Press releases of website updates ☐
- Other.....

Q13. How do you evaluate how successful your dedicated website has been? (tick more than one if appropriate)

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1) Visitor counters | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) Number of hits | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) Number of click-throughs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) Number of emails you receive | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) Analyse server logs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) Communication audit | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) Number of press calls referring to website | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8) Ask users for their feedback | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9) Monitoring your website availability | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10) Monitoring links to your website | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11) Check search engine ranking | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12) I don't evaluate my website | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13) Other..... | |

Q14. Which is the single most important factor in determining how successful your dedicated website has been? (please select one number from the above list)

.....

Q15. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest) how useful for you is your dedicated website?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Q16. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest) how much more effective in achieving your goals is your dedicated website compared to traditional communication tools?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Q17. Do you think that your dedicated website will be a vote-winner?

Yes ☐
 No ☐
 Don't know ☐

Q18. Does your dedicated website provide greater promotional benefits for (please tick only one):

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| The Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yourself | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Both equally | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Neither | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Would you be prepared to further assist this project by answering additional questions via (tick as appropriate):

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Email interview | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Telephone interview | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Face-to-face interview | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Thank you very much for your co-operation.

Appendix C (Questionnaire to website visitors 2006)

Please note that respondents did not view this survey in the Word format below.

Annette Brooke Website Survey

A research project by the Centre for Public Communication Research, Bournemouth University, in conjunction with Annette Brooke MP. The findings will, in part, be used for a PhD thesis. Please note that this survey is for an academic project, and Annette Brooke will not have access to individual replies.

Q1) Is Annette Brooke your constituency MP?

- Yes ☐
No ☐
Don't Know ☐

Q2) Would you describe yourself as (select only one):

- A Liberal Democrat Party member ☐
A Liberal Democrat supporter ☐
I vote for Annette Brooke not the Party ☐
An undecided voter ☐
I vote for another party ☐
Member of another Party ☐
None of the above ☐

Q3) How old are you:

- Under eighteen ☐
18-24 ☐
25-34 ☐
35-44 ☐
45-54 ☐
55-64 ☐
65 and over ☐

Q4) What gender are you?

- Male ☐
Female ☐

Q5) How did you hear about Annette Brooke's web site (Please tick all that apply):

- Liberal Democrat Party membership pack ☐
Liberal Democrat Party web site ☐
Another web site ☐
By meeting Annette Brooke ☐
In the local press ☐
A Party email ☐
Word of mouth/personal recommendation ☐
Party written literature ☐
I was surfing the Web ☐
Other.....

Q6) How often do you visit Annette Brooke's web site:

- This is my first time ☐
- Weekly ☐
- Monthly ☐
- Occasionally ☐
- As and when I need information ☐
- Don't know ☐

Q7) Why have you visited Annette Brooke's web site (Please tick all that apply):

- Information on Annette Brooke's activities ☐
- Information on Annette Brooke's policy views ☐
- Information on local Party events ☐
- Information on other local events ☐
- Information on national current issues ☐
- Information on local current issues ☐
- View Annette Brooke's press releases ☐
- View Annette Brooke's speeches ☐
- Information about the Liberal Democrats ☐
- Gain information directly, rather than through the media ☐
- Inform my political views ☐
- Help me decide who to vote for ☐
- To discover what my opponents are saying or doing ☐
- To be consulted on the national political issues of the day ☐
- To be consulted on the local issues of the day ☐
- To be entertained ☐
- I don't know ☐
- Other..... ☐

Q8) Does Annette Brooke's web site provide what you are looking for:

- Yes, all of the time ☐
- Yes, most of the time ☐
- Yes, some of the time ☐
- No ☐
- Don't know ☐

Q9) How would you describe the material you see on Annette Brooke's web site:

- Very relevant to you ☐
- Fairly relevant to you ☐
- Of occasional interest ☐
- Not very relevant to you ☐
- Mostly irrelevant to you ☐
- Don't know ☐

Q10) Generally, how do you use the information you receive (Please tick all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Forward interesting material to friends | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If discussing politics with others | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To inform my political views | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To decide who to vote for | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To help me persuade others | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For my job | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For research purposes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For news stories | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To inform my campaigning | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't use the material | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q11) As a result of visiting Annette Brooke's web site (please tick all that apply):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| I am more supportive towards Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am more supportive to the Liberal Democrats | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am less supportive towards Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I know more of what Annette Brooke is doing on my behalf | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My attitude towards Annette Brooke is unchanged | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have changed my views on policy issues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have not changed my views on policy issues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have a clearer view of Annette Brooke's policies | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have contacted Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have joined the Liberal Democrats | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have volunteered to help Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have donated money to Annette Brooke's campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Recommended Annette Brooke's web site to my friends | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| It has had no effect at all | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q12) What impact on your voting intentions has visiting Annette Brooke's web site had:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Much more likely to vote for Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Slightly more likely to vote for Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Made no difference to my voting intentions | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Slightly less likely to vote for Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Much less likely to vote for Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I cannot vote in Annette Brooke's constituency | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| None | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q13) Compared to other political web sites you may have visited, how would you rate Annette Brooke's web site (with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent):

- | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) Content | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) Layout/design | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) Ease of finding your way around the site | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) Ability for you to have your say | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) How regularly updated | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) Compared to other MPs web sites | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q14) In terms of informing you about Annette Brooke, please rate each of the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being of little importance and 5 being highly important):

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) Local newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) Local radio | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) Regional television | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) National newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) National radio | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) National television | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) News organisations web sites | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8) Labour party leaflets | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9) Face-to-face conversations with Annette Brooke | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10) Public meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11) Friends and family | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12) Annette Brooke's web site | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q15) In term of helping you provide Annette Brooke with your views on policy issues of importance to you, please rate each of the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being of little importance and 5 being highly important):

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) A personal meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) A public meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) By letter | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) By telephone | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) By email | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) Through the local media | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) Through an intermediary | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Many thanks for your help, all your responses will remain anonymous.

Nigel Jackson

The Centre for Public Communications Research

Bournemouth University

For more information please visit our website: <http://media.bournemouth.ac.uk/cpcr.html>

Under the Data Protection Act the details collected for this survey will be held securely by Bournemouth University for research purposes. We will not sell or disclose any personal details to outside organisations or individuals. Any data you provide in this survey which is used in research papers, publications or presentations will be anonymous.

Appendix D (Web-hosted questionnaire to e-newsletter subscribers)

Sent to Steve Webb's Email Consultation list

MPs E-NEWSLETTER SURVEY

A Research Project by the Centre for Public Communication Research, Bournemouth University, in conjunction with Steve Webb MP. The findings will, in part, be used for a PhD thesis. Please note that this survey is for an academic project, and Steve Webb will not have access to individual replies.

Q1) How old are you:

Under eighteen

☐

18-24

☐

25-34

☐

35-44

☐

45-54

☐

55-64

☐

65 and over

☐

Q2) What gender are you:

Male

☐

Female

☐

Q3) How did you hear about Steve Webb's e-mail consultations (Please tick all that apply):

From a Liberal Democrat survey

☐

From another Liberal Democrat leaflet

☐

Steve Webb's web site

☐

By word of mouth personal/recommendation

☐

By meeting Steve Webb

☐

In the local press

☐

Local party written literature

☐

Other.....

Q4) How long have you been receiving Steve Webb's e-mail consultations:

3 years

☐

2-3 years

☐

1-2 years

☐

1 year

☐

Less than one year

☐

Don't Know

☐

Other.....

Q5) Why do you subscribe to Steve Webb's e-mail consultations (Please tick all that apply):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| To be consulted on the national issues of the day | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To be consulted on the local issues of the day | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Information on Steve Webb's activities | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Information on Steve Webb's policy views | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Information on local events | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Gain information directly, rather than through the media | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Information about the Liberal Democrats | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Inform my political views | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Help me decide who to vote for | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To discover what my opponents are saying or doing | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To be entertained | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't know | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q6) Does Steve Webb's e-mail consultations provide what you are looking for:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Yes, all of the time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, most of the time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, some of the time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q7) How would you describe the material you receive from Steve Webb's e-mail consultations:

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very relevant | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fairly relevant | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Of occasional interest | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not very relevant | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mostly irrelevant | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q8) Generally, how do you use the information you receive (Please tick all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Forward interesting material to friends | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If discussing politics with others | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To inform my political views | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To decide who to vote for | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To help me persuade others | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For my job | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For research purposes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For news stories | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To inform my campaigning | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't use the material | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q9) As a result of receiving Steve Webb's e-mail consultations: (Please tick all that apply):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| I am more supportive towards Steve Webb | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am less supportive towards Steve Webb | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I know more of what Steve Webb is doing on my behalf | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My attitude towards Steve Webb is unchanged | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have changed my views on policy issues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have not changed my views on policy issues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have a clearer view of Steve Webb's policies | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have contacted Steve Webb | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have joined the Liberal Democrats | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have volunteered to help Steve Webb | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have donated money to Steve Webb's campaigns | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I recommended Steve Webb's e-consultations to my friends | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel that I am part of an online community | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| It has had no effect at all | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other..... | |

Q10) In the recent General Election did receiving Steve Webb's e-mail consultations change your vote:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| No, I have always voted for the Liberal Democrats | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No, I have always voted for another Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, I was an undecided voter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, I had usually voted for another Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Can't/did not vote in this constituency | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Don't Know | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q11) In terms of informing you about Steve Webb, please rate each of the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being of little importance and 5 being highly important):

- | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) Local newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) Local radio | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) Regional television | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) National newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) National radio | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) National television | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) News organisations web sites | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8) Liberal Democrat leaflets | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9) Face-to-face conversations with Steve Webb | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10) Public meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11) Friends and family | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12) Steve Webb's web site | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13) Steve Webb's e-mail consultations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q12) In term of helping you provide Steve Webb with your views on policy issues of importance to you, please rate each of the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being of little importance and 5 being highly important):

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) A personal meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2) A public meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3) By letter | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) By telephone | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5) By email | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6) Through the local media | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7) Through an intermediary | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q13) Would you describe yourself as:

| | |
|---|--------------------------|
| A Liberal Democrat member | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A Liberal Democrat supporter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I vote for Steve Webb and not the Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| An undecided voter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A Labour Party supporter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A Conservative Party supporter | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I vote for another Party | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Many thanks for your help, all your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

Privacy Statement: Under the Data Protection Act 1998 the details collected for this survey will be held securely by Bournemouth University for research purposes. We will not sell or disclose any personal details to outside organisations or individuals. Any data you provide in this survey which is used in research papers, publications or presentations will be anonymous.

Appendix E Copy of Press-Release Based E-newsletter

From: oatenm@parliament.uk

Sent: 07 April 2004 19:24

MP told of help for mobile home owners

Winchester MP Mark Oaten has successfully lobbied the government for increased protection for mobile park home owners. "Following several representations by MPs", the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has this week confirmed it plans to introduce amendments to better provide for mobile home owners.

To view full details about this go to: <http://www.markoaten.com/cgi-bin/index.cgi?ref=2004/04/07001.txt>

To unsubscribe from this list go to: <http://www.markoaten.com/cgi-bin/unsub.cgi?e=nigelajackson> | @[aol.com](mailto:RHZA@aol.com)&u=RHZA

Appendix F Copy of Newsletter based E-newsletter

From: Nick Palmer (nickmpl@aol.com)

Sent: 08 April 2004 19:16

Subject: Local Broxtowe buses, rail and homelessness

Hi all -

Happy Easter! I hope you all have a relaxing time. I'm available as usual (though planning to fit in some gardening and other lazier things) but most offices are closed until Tuesday.

Mainly I wanted to catch up with some local news items this time. First, my intermittent appeal for a couple of hours of your time:

1. Help for newsletter -----

Next week we'll start delivering issue 11 of Positive Politics, my four-page newsletter that in theory goes to all households. While I hope that nobody on this list feels that I don't keep in touch, it's important to ensure that the majority who aren't email are also formed as well.

We never have enough help to do this without extreme effort - I generally do 1000 or so myself - and the danger is always that it takes so long that it's out of date by the time it arrives. So if you could spare some time to help (any time in the next few weeks), it'd be much appreciated - just let me know how many you'd be willing to do (allow about an hour per 100 copies) and your contact phone number and address to get you the copies. We'd also welcome offers to help deliver leaflets in May for the European election.

Even if you've helped before, please don't assume that we're assuming you'll help again - we're shy about pestering people, so please let me know anyway!

2. Local news

a) Rail upgrades -----

The Government's Network Rail agency have announced their £26bn 10 year plan, including quite a lot of local developments:

- Track, signal and crossing repairs at Beeston, Toton and south of Nottingham in the next two years
- Resurfacing of the platforms at Beeston and Attenborough in the next 12 months
- Overhaul to two thirds of the signals in the county to reduce delays due to signal failure
- Refurbishment of Nottingham Station's Carrington St bridge and platform footbridge
- Increased use of Toton engineering depot

- Maintenance is now all done in-house instead of being farmed out to private contractors: it's claimed this has led to a reduction in delays

I'm pleased to see new investment in Beeston and Attenborough, since many felt that the cutback in services from Beeston to London from last year was the start of a decline. That cutback was due to end this spring but is now only being restored in the autumn, as Midland Mainline are still running extra trains to Manchester to help out with the West Coast Mainline work.

The London route is going to have a tough year with the St Pancras station rebuild though obviously it'll be good next year when the job is done and we can look forward to a fast link to the Continent. The bad news is that the Central Railway proposal for a roll

on/roll-off train service to take lorries off the M1 has failed to attract the unconditional funding that it needed to get Government approval. This scheme, which I'd warmly welcomed, looks likely to be back on ice for the foreseeable future.
b) Trent/Barton attack subsidies! -----

Biting the hand that feeds it? A controversial speech by senior Trent/Barton bus manager has attacked the use of £750,000 of County Council money to subsidise loss-making bus services. He argued that it would be better to reinforce success by supporting the main routes (like the 100) rather than struggling routes. As Trent/Barton makes more money from the main routes, I can see that they might think that way. But the struggling routes that the County supports are often vital to a community: if they go, a whole area suddenly gets cut from public transport. It may sound a bit populist to say that, but I think that we have to look at the wider community.
c) Homelessness action -----

Following the church campaign for more local action on homelessness, Broxtowe Council is looking at a range of measures. One is to convert Plowman Court in Stapleford (20 flats) to a mixture of longer-term single person accommodation and temporary homes for the homeless. The Court has high turnover (20% per year) and existing residents who may want to move are to be offered help to go to improved flats elsewhere.

The council is also looking at setting up private leasing partnerships with landlords who would make properties available at a low rent in return for a guarantee of full occupancy. A further initiative is a deposit guarantee scheme to help people with no money to get the initial deposit.
d) Tram update -----

The latest estimate is that the council will submit its bid for the tram funding to the Government around July. If the funding is available, a public inquiry will follow next spring at which we can all give evidence. A final decision would likely be made in autumn 2005. My understanding is that the Department of Transport are impressed by the flying start of Line One (which has been carrying so many passengers that there is a serious problem in selling them all tickets - NET has been frantically recruiting more ticket collectors) and there's a fairly high probability that a full application will get approval if the calculations stack up. Finally, a few diary dates...

April 22 evening: I've helped organise a joint event with Nottingham University Politics Department and the Bramcote and Wollaton Peace Group, to be held at the university, discussing how peace, antiterrorism and just issues can be tackled sensibly in the coming years. Defend the Earth
April 24 10-12: Chilwell Rd Methodist church are having a Fair Trade coffee tasting session - hope to compare tastes
Z

r there.

May 7: Roy Hattersley at Kimberley Miners' Welfare from 7.30. ^{*}
is a Labour fund-raiser so there will be an admission charge (£3
I remember correctly).

And parents with children at Chilwell Comp, Fairfield,
Sunnyside and Chetywnd Road may be pleased (or
alarmed, as the case may be) to hear that I'm visiting
schools on April 22-23. This is part of an "MPs
back to school" initiative which various educational
development charities have launched with the ~~tear~~
Best regards

Nick

Yahoo! Groups Links

<*> To visit your group on the web, go to:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BroxtoweInfo/>

<*> To unsubscribe from this group, send an email to:

BroxtoweInfo-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

<*> Your use of Yahoo! Groups is subject to:

<http://docs.yahoo.com/info/terms/>

Appendix G Who Visits an MPs website?

Table 8.1 Are visitors to MPs' websites constituents?

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|-----|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Yes | 7 (47%) | 31 (53%) | 14 (52%) | 52 (52%) |
| No | 8 (53%) | 27 (47%) | 13 (48%) | 48 (48%) |

Table 8.2 Age of visitors to websites

| | Annette Brooke | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Under 18 | 0 | 1 (2%) | 1 (4%) | 2 (2%) |
| 18-24 | 2 (13%) | 13 (22%) | 7 (26%) | 22 (22%) |
| 25-34 | 4 (27%) | 13 (22%) | 2 (7%) | 19 (19%) |
| 35-44 | 1 (7%) | 15 (26%) | 8 (30%) | 24 (24%) |
| 45-54 | 4 (27%) | 9 (16%) | 3 (11%) | 16 (16%) |
| 55-64 | 2 (13%) | 7 (12%) | 5 (19%) | 14 (14%) |
| 65 and over | 2 (13%) | 0 | 1 (4%) | 2 (2%) |

Table 8.3 Gender of visitors to websites

| | Annette Brooke* | Ian Lucas | Gary Streeter | Total |
|--------|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Male | 8 (53%) | 39 (67%) | 18 (67%) | 65 (65%) |
| Female | 6 (40%) | 19 (33%) | 9 (33%) | 34 (34%) |

* One missing

Table 8.4 Self-identification of voting behaviour for Annette Brooke

| | |
|---|---------|
| A Liberal Democrat Member | 3 (20%) |
| A Liberal Democrat Supporter | 4 (27%) |
| I vote for Annette Brooke not the Party | 2 (13%) |
| An undecided voter | 1 (7%) |
| A supporter of another Party | 4 (7%) |
| None of the above | 1 (7%) |

Table 8.5 Self-identification of voting behaviour for Ian Lucas

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| A Labour Party Member | 3 (5%) |
| A Labour Party Supporter | 16 (28%) |
| I vote for Ian Lucas not the Party | 4 (7%) |
| An undecided voter | 9 (16%) |
| A supporter of another Party | 17 (29%) |
| None of the above | 9 (16%) |

Table 8.6 Self-identification of voting behaviour for Gary Streeter

| | |
|--|---------|
| A Conservative Party Member | 5 (19%) |
| A Conservative Party Supporter | 3 (11%) |
| I vote for Gary Streeter not the Party | 4 (15%) |
| An undecided voter | 4 (15%) |
| A supporter of another Party | 9 (33%) |
| None of the above | 2 (7%) |

Appendix H Who subscribes to an MPs e-newsletter?

Subscribers to e-newsletters: constituents versus non-constituents

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|-----|-------------|-------------|
| Yes | 890 (100%)* | 203 (89.4%) |
| No | | 24 (10.6%) |

* Steve Webb's email list is only open to constituents who need to provide a local postcode.

Table 8.8 Age of subscribers to e-newsletters

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Under 18 | 11 (1.2%) | 0 |
| 18-24 | 35 (3.9%) | 9 (4%) |
| 25-34 | 72 (8.1%) | 42 (18.5%) |
| 35-44 | 122 (13.7%) | 48 (21.1%) |
| 45-54 | 209 (23.5%) | 63 (27.8%) |
| 55-64 | 259 (29.1%) | 45 (19.8%) |
| 65 and over | 182 (20.4%) | 20 (8.8%) |

Table 8.9 Gender

| | Steve Webb | Nick Palmer |
|--------|-------------|-------------|
| Male | 511 (57.4%) | 150 (66.1%) |
| Female | 378 (42.5%) | 77 (33.9%) |

NB: One respondent is missing from Steve Webb's survey.

Table 8.10 Self-identification of voting behaviour for subscribers to Steve Webb

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| A Liberal Democrat Member | 48 (5.4%) |
| A Liberal Democrat Supporter | 211 (23.7%) |
| I vote for Steve Webb not the Party | 369 (41.5%) |
| An undecided voter | 90 (10.1%) |
| A supporter of another Party | 162 (18.1%) |

Table 8.11 Self-identification of voting behaviour for subscribers to Nick Palmer

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| A Labour Party Member | 21 (9.3%) |
| A Labour Party Supporter | 45 (19.8%) |
| I vote for Nick Palmer not the Party | 79 (34.8%) |
| An undecided voter | 42 (18.5%) |
| A supporter of another Party | 38 (16.7%) |

Appendix I Additional comments by questionnaire respondents to the Steve Webb and Nick Palmer e-newsletter surveys

Below is the additional comments made under the option “Other, please specify.”

Additional comments by respondents to Nick Palmer’s questionnaire

Why subscribe

- Because he does read and take account of my replies to his e-newsletters
- To interact and learn and give an opinion on subjects of interest to me
- He is a sensible, mostly logical, mathematician. I often agree with a lot of what he says.
- Up date info on important local and national issues so that I can comment if I want to
- Having a direct source of Westminster information is most valuable of all
- As a voluntary organisation in Broxtowe I send email on to my staff to keep them up to date of what is happening
- It provides a really effective round-up of a range of local issues
- To put my point of view across to Nick and often ask him to protest on my behalf
- Sometimes to offer comment on hot topics of interest to me
- Nick occasionally asks for an opinion, and I feel these opinions are taken seriously
- I find Nick Palmer a breath of fresh air. I find his opinions fair and balanced
- To gain an insight into how my MP thinks about certain issues

How do you use the information?

- Nick presents a balanced view which I feel informs me accurately of both local and national issues
- Give me a sense of influencing policy in however small a way
- I enjoy giving him feedback, and being informed about local and national current issues
- To inform me in general about local issues
- To discuss local issues with local friends
- To engage in debate with a very patient Nick. I appreciate his NNFR facility
- This is the best bit.....He actually reads my feedback and responds. Wow
- Keep my parents and family updated on what’s happening in our area, and in national politics
- To help me in my job as a Parish Councillor helping others to understand local issues
- I read it to get an idea of what the political atmosphere is for my local MP
- To discuss local, non-party issues
- I like to keep up to date with what Nick can do for our area and for us
- Attend events and respond to him
- To offer occasional comment
- I find his e-newsletter useful to know what is going on locally and nationally
- I some times reply with my own views

As a result of receiving Nick Palmer’s e-newsletter

- I will continue to vote for Nick Palmer although I have not always been a Labour supporter
- I still have not and do not intend to vote for anybody
- All information is useful and is gratefully received, but this does not mean that I will vote for him
- I have become incredibly impressed with his integrity and his tireless service
- I understand him more, but still would not vote for Labour
- It has helped reduce some of my cynicism of politics and politicians
- I feel more part of the political process. it is easier to reply to e-mail
- I know where available NHS dentists are!
- I know more of what Nick P is doing but not necessarily on my behalf

- His balanced and thoughtful presentation makes a very refreshing change
- Although I do not always agree with what he is doing, I have more respect for him
- I appreciate the effort to consult on certain issues

Additional comments by respondents to Steve Webb's questionnaire

Why subscribe

- To share my views with my local MP. I believe that he reads and responds to them.
- I don't trust the media, but I do seem to trust Steve.
- Makes me feel my views count.
- It helps me understand and develop a strong relationship with my MP.
- Hopefully feedback given helps progress issues.
- Steve Webb asks me what I think and answers questions. Most politicians tell me what they think.
- It is good to be asked about how I feel on local and national issues
- To put my point of view across even if he does not agree.
- So I can get his attention quickly on issues that concern me.
- Because Steve asked for email contacts and is (so far) the best at it!
- To assist in the political decision making process.
- To have a small say in decisions made in parliament.
- To draw his attention to items he might otherwise miss.
- To give my views on specific issues. To ask questions.
- To be able to engage in the decision making process in parliament.
- To make my views known on issues I feel strongly about.
- To have a voice where we may not agree with the MP
- It seems an essential part of the democratic process that one's MP is accessible.
- To feel that I count.
- I like to feel that MY views and that of the individual DO count.
- I'd never "speak" to an MP otherwise.
- To feel that I am helping with local democracy.
- I didn't subscribe. I ended up on it somehow and have stayed.
- Wasn't aware that I subscribe but get them anyway!

How do you use the information?

- To try and convince Steve Webb that my views are also right!!
- To put my point of view to my MP.
- The email consultation service has re-awoken my interest in local/national issues.
- So I can reply and give my views.
- To inform my views, but not politically.
- To discuss with my husband
- To see what hobby horse Steve is climbing on at the moment.
- Mainly to see what is happening locally.
- The points Steve raises are not political, they are local.
- I can give Steve Webb my views as an extension of the formal democratic process.
- So I can contribute to local democracy and debate.
- The information flow is mostly the other way – from me to him.
- I like to stay abreast of the political world. I find that this helps.

As a result of receiving Steve Webb's consultations

- I have found out what everyone else thinks too.
- I engage because Steve is the MP, and he does a good job for his constituency.
- I reel I am better informed on some policy issues, local and national.

- I am still very ambivalent towards him.
- Although a member of the Conservative party, I do help on local issues.
- It has made me an active member of the Conservative Party.
- I have changed SOME of my views on policy issues.
- I am away studying at university, so it helps me keep up to date with what is happening back home.
- It helped me realise that my MP is a real person who DOES care about local issues.
- I LIKE TO THINK that an independent view is being considered.
- On one aspect related to local healthcare, I thought he misrepresented the issues.
- I feel that my views count.
- Contacted him on several issues, very impressed with the speed of response.
- More information enables me to have a more informed opinion on any issue.
- On some issues I have changed my mind, on others I have not.

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