Interactive Government: Sorting out Fads and Fundamentals

by Ted White, MP

In recent years there have been dramatic changes in the methods used for the transfer of information. This has had a major impact on political parties, the individual MPs, and Parliament itself. This article looks at some of these changes and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of the new technologies.

When I came to Ottawa in 1993 I discovered that my predecessor for North Vancouver did not even have a fax machine in his office. I already knew, coming from the private sector, that we had entered the information age and that those who lacked the equipment to facilitate efficient communications were certain to become the dinosaurs of the new age.

> **We are in a period of evolution with respect to technology and at this stage it is not entirely clear which systems will survive in the longer term, and which will remain as fads, or perhaps gradually lose popularity and fade away.**

From the first time I arrived in Ottawa as an MP I carried my laptop with me. It contains a copy of the maximizer database from my office, allowing me at the touch of a button to locate a constituent, to know what communication there has been in the past, to read letters I have written to him or her, and to compose and print replies.

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These days, of course, e-mail has become very popular, but even though I receive e-mail messages from constituents on almost a daily basis, those messages tend to be from the same group of people, and as much as one-third of new contacts turn out to be bogus. By that I mean someone else uses an e-mail users address to send a request for information, as a joke, or an e-mail user sends a request for information to be sent to someone else's e-mail address or street address.

As a result, I have instituted a policy of sending a return e-mail message to every new contact to ask for a mailing address and phone number so that we can verify that the contact is genuine.

In my opinion, the average e-mail message also suffers from several other practical problems:

- Firstly, it does not look professional. It is not uncommon for at least half of the first page to be taken up by connection codes, and the appearance of the document overall is not compatible with the high standards which I try to achieve in my own office. This is just one reason why I do not, as a rule, use e-mail to reply to communications from constituents.

- Secondly, there is no easy way of checking that an e-mail message is genuine, or that it has not been tampered with prior to being printed out in hard copy form. I like to ensure that everything that leaves my office which is purported to have originated with me, has my original signature on it. I will fax a copy, but I always follow-up with mailed hard copy. Imagine an e-mail message arriving on the computer of someone who is a bit of a ham. How easy it would be to add a few extra words, or subtract some words, and then, with the touch of a button, e-mail the document to an enormous mailing list. Correcting such a problem could be a major headache and I prefer not to take the risk.

- Thirdly, much of what leaves my office in response to communications from constituents requires that there be enclosures in the form of copies of newspaper articles, photographs, pages from government publications, and so on. E-mail at present, offers no easy way of preparing such a variety of material for transmission, although fax easily and conveniently permits this transmission, as does the regular mail, albeit at a slower pace.

- The fourth problem with e-mail at this stage is caused by the ease with which composers of e-mail can send vast amounts of material to vast numbers of recipients, usually accompanied by a demands for an immediate and detailed response.

It seems that quite a large percentage of those who use the e-mail system, have enormous amounts of time at their disposal, which they use to compile data related to their personal interests, so that they can lobby politicians. Whether or not they are representative of the population at large is certainly open to question, but I can give an example to support my contention that perhaps they are not.

Just prior to the recent election in New Zealand, I discovered a web site which offered the opportunity to cast a vote as if it was election day. Once a person had cast his or her vote, the results to date would appear on screen. Now New Zealand has recently switched to a Mixed member Proportional system of representation, so there were more than 30 different parties on the ballot, one of which was the Aotearoa Legalize Cannabis Party.

Well, the Aotearoa Legalize Cannabis Party was doing exceptionally well, and would have had a large number of seats in the new Government if this web site had actually been representative of what was going to happen on voting day. In fact, Aotearoa Legalize Cannabis eventually ended up with about 1.42 percent of the vote.

As someone with an intense interest in polling techniques and measuring the public will, this was a good signal for me that those browsing the world wide web either have a wonderful sense of humour or, for other reasons such as available recreation time, are not yet truly representative of society as a whole. The question remains at this point whether enough people will ever become web browsers to give confidence that those browsers are representative of society as a whole.

It may well be that the web will remain almost fad like in nature for those coming on line for the first time. The new subscriber surfs like crazy for a few weeks, calling up anything he or she can think of to see if it truly exists on the net, and yes, it does. Then gradually the novelty wears off, because the subscriber discovers that just because it is on the net does not mean that it is true, accurate, authoritative or useful.

It reminds me a little of when fax first became popular and everyone was sending one another cartoons and jokes via fax. That does not happen very much any more, and I suspect that surfing the net is also going to drop off in popularity once people can see its true value as a research tool from properly accredited sources.

In this regard, I would like to go back to the earlier example I used regarding the New Zealand election. Elections New Zealand had an official web page which described the voting process, listed all of the parties and ridings and provided maps of the various regions of the country. On election night, the results were posted and refreshed about every 30 seconds, so it was possible to obtain up to the minute, official results, on line, from anywhere in the world.

In fact, amazing but true, I was printing official results at my North Vancouver home, and faxing them to my brother in New Zealand, before New Zealand television

had managed to broadcast those same results locally. The technology is truly awesome.

> *It is my opinion that the growth of the Internet is just one more nail in the coffin of information control by governments, and politically speaking, is clearly a tool for the application of ever-increasing pressure on existing government for greater public input into the process of governing.*

An interesting downside, if we can call it that, also became evident during that exercise. Unofficial sites, which I assume were set up by various riding associations, were beating Elections New Zealand to the gun, by posting results based on phone calls from their poll scrutineers, before Elections New Zealand had posted them on the official site. Now in a small country like New Zealand, such activity is probably of little significance, but in a country like Canada, with several time zones, and with media blackouts in the West on the release of election results from the East and Central Canada, we could be faced with an interesting situation.

What happens if someone decides to post unofficial results which are bogus in order to try to influence western voters prior to closing of the polls. And for that matter, how would the official results on an Elections Canada site be blocked from Westerners. I cannot think of a way. Will we eventually be faced with having to hold all federal election results until after the polls have closed in British Columbia? Media blackouts are likely to become entirely irrelevant over the next few years, especially as more and more people become accustomed to using the Internet.

This will not just apply to election results, but also to other media blackouts such as those imposed on court hearings for example. Anyone with information to share can simply place it on the Internet.

Let us look, for example, at what is commonly known as the election gag law passed by the old line political parties prior to the last election. The judge who struck down the law agreed that its purpose was "to restrict any meaningful third party input". It controlled the amount of money which could be spent by a third party during the election campaign. The courts have struck down this type of law twice now, once in 1984, and for the second time this year. But using the Internet and other electronic methods to distribute information, and to debate the issues, is something the old style politicians cannot

control with gag laws. Today freedom of expression reigns supreme.

The cost to participate is insignificant, the source is hard to trace and control, and information can be posted via another country like the USA to avoid any local restrictions.

Mass broadcasts of information can be made via fax and e-mail from places outside of any effective government control. The political ramifications could be enormous.

This leads us to a discussion about the use of new communications technologies in the strictly political arena of election campaigns, because although most parties and candidates are still using traditional techniques, I am personally more supportive of using technology oriented methods.

During the 1993 election campaign I did not carry out even one day of the traditional door knocking. I did not knock on a single door yet I garnered a significantly higher number of votes than had ever been achieved by my predecessor, who had held the riding for at least 15 years. And this despite the fact that around 15 percent still voted PC as usual.

I believe it was my use of technology which added to the general dissatisfaction with the PCs, captured some of the Liberal and NDP vote. How did I do it?

First, I stayed at the office from 7:30 a.m. to about 10:00 p.m. every night so that I could handle every phone call from people who wanted questions answered. Second, we made it easy to get in contact by printing the office phone number on every election sign. Third, we produced 2,000 videotapes, about 5 minutes in length, which we delivered and picked up on a rotational basis to homes throughout the riding. The videotape did my doorknocking for me, at a time convenient for the voter to watch and listen to the message. The videotape got me right inside the voter's home, it invited the viewer to call me with questions, and it gave the phone number. That is why I was at the office in the evenings.

Next time around we will go even further in our use of technology. In addition to the video and phone number on the signs, my flyer delivery people will all have cellphones so that they can call me from the field if or when they come across someone with an axe to grind or a question to ask. We will post a web site, answering the most commonly asked questions, perhaps including some video. We might even produce a CD ROM containing the party platform and a copy of the video. All of this new technology can be of tremendous benefit during an election campaign.

And even the terrible task of matching phone numbers to the voters list is easier these days when we have the

entire Canada telephone directory on CD ROM, and the voters list on disk.

In addition, we have a database on Maximizer at the Riding Association identifying known supporters, who, with the touch of a computer key can be faxed, e-mailed or regular mailed during the campaign. The technology, for those who are prepared to embrace it, can really make a difference.

Conclusion

A number of Reform MPs, including myself, have used or are using ongoing computer based sampling of public opinion on current issues, and there is enormous potential for the use of such systems as aids to governing. We have a vast array of choices in communications technology to draw upon, offering different combinations of speed, convenience, accuracy and security.

At this stage, it is not clear that one method alone is capable of replacing all of the others, but if you are like me, you can see the enormous potential.

It is common these days to see as many as half a dozen laptops in the House, and when I look around at those who are using them, I cannot help wonder if I am seeing the MPs who have already recognized the benefits that the new communication technologies have brought to the job. If they have, then they will be the best able to adapt to the coming new democracy.

In the end analysis, of course, we do not really need all of these modern communications technologies, and we do not need citizens initiative and referendum legislation in order to know what taxpayers expect of us. All that is lacking, is the political will to abandon pieces of party ideology in favour of the will of those who pay our salaries. But that is a topic for another day.