Internet Use by Quebec Parliamentarians

by Angelo Elias and Denis Monière

Since the introduction of televised parliamentary debates the Internet is likely the technological invention that will most influence parliamentarians' work, by modifying the relationship between them and their constituents. This new form of two-way communication allows large amounts of information to be disseminated on a large scale for low cost without being filtered by traditional media. The Internet can also improve communication between parliamentarians and party members, lobby groups and the public.

The aim of this research was to find out how parliamentarians use the Internet in their activities as representatives, as well as what problems could arise from the use of this new technology. We looked at previous work from the United States and France that found parliamentarians use the Internet in a conventional manner and seldom take advantage of the potential for interactivity.

Owen, Davis and Strickler's study (1999)[1] is based on a 1996 survey answered by 15% of Members of Congress. It found that the respondents used the Internet mostly as a personal promotional tool and seldom used its interactivity features. The authors point out the problems caused by e-mail management. The Internet has caused an increase in the volume of letters received from the public. Political staff said they were swamped by the influx of mail because they did not have the necessary resources to answer all of the letters within a reasonable time. In addition, because the Internet offers both private citizens and organizations a cheap way of mass distributing large amounts of information, Members of Congress received many letters from people outside of their electoral district (about 50% of all received messages). Participants in the study also said that e-mail messages tended

to be more spontaneous and less restrained than non-electronic mail because the Internet lessens inhibitions.

Eighteen per cent of the French National Assembly[2] (103 deputies) participated in the study conducted by the French gateway, Netpolitique, in July 2001.

Ninety per cent of the deputies had an e-mail address in their constituency office and 70% had one at their office at the National Assembly. Of the various Internet uses available, the deputies used e-mail the most, followed by documentary research and Web surfing on institutional sites. However, the Internet correspondence mostly comprised internal communication between deputies and their assistants, which seemed much more significant than exchanges with the public. In fact, 50% of the respondents said that they received fewer than 50 e-mails a week, which is less than the average number a French worker receives. "Although the Internet has become a work tool for parliamentarians, it has not yet become a communication tool."

We thus set about finding out the attitude of Quebec MPs in the House of Commons and of Members of Quebec's National Assembly towards the Internet, their use of Internet connections, their e-mail management, the importance they attach to having a personal Web site, and the way they perceive the impact of the Internet on the relationship between elected representatives and the public.

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Table 1
Uses of Internet Connections

	E-mail	Documentary Research	Visits to Institutional Web sites	Information on Current Events
Often	89%	63%	59%	57%
Sometimes	6%	30%	37%	33%
Seldom	3%	7%	3%	9%
Never	1%	0%	1%	1%

Methodology

The study was conducted between October 15 and November 15, 2001. Two hundred questionnaires were sent to provincial and federal parliamentarians. We received back 71 questionnaires, for a response rate of 35.5%. This high response rate indicates parliamentarians' level of interest in this issue. We heard from 42 MNAs and 29 MPs. Our sample also includes nine Ministers (six at the provincial level and three at the federal level). The distribution of the respondents by party affiliation is as follows: 23 from the Parti Québécois, 18 from the Quebec Liberal Party, 1 from the Action démocratique du Québec, 8 from the Liberal Party of Canada, and 21 from the Bloc Québécois. Aside from the under-represented Liberal Party of Canada, this distribution corresponds to the parties' representation.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions covering 32 topics. The first two questions dealt with Internet connections and their uses. The next 13 questions were on e-mail use, and questions 16, 17 and 18 dealt with the MPs' personal Web sites and their view of the Internet within the democratic process. The last two questions dealt with their party affiliation and their status as either a private Member or a Minister.

Internet Connections and Their Uses

All of the Quebec parliamentarians have an Internet connection at their parliamentary office and at their constituency offices. They are better equipped than their French counterparts in this respect: In addition, more than 79% of Quebec parliamentarians had Internet connections at home, which is distinctly higher than the 53% of Quebec households that do. They are also more connected than the French; only 35% of French households have an Internet connection.

Quebec private Members use e-mail most often, as do their French counterparts. Private Members and Ministers make similar use of the Internet, with the exception of documentary research, which is done more often by private Members than by Ministers. Only 33% of the lat-

ter use this function, compared with 67% of the former. This is because Ministers have a larger staff than do private Members.

Use and View of E-mail

Ninety-six per cent of respondents said that e-mail is fairly or very important in the execution of their duties. Thirty-one per cent said they received between 10 and 50 e-mails a week, 23% received between 50 and 100, and 44% received more than 100. Only 13% of French respondents fit into this last category. It seems that e-mail management has become a daily task for parliamentarians. Private Members received the largest number of e-mails, since 48% of them passed the 100 mark, compared with only 22% of Ministers, who are less solicited by their constituents. Another interesting fact is that MPs received the greatest number of e-mails every week. Ninety-three per cent of them said they receive more than 100 e-mails a week, compared with only 10% of MNAs. This can be explained by the fact that MPs serve a larger electorate than do their provincial counterparts.

In addition, it seems that e-mail is becoming more popular than traditional postal mail; 82% of respondents said they received as many e-mails as letters, if not more. This tendency is more pronounced among private Members than among Ministers. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents said they checked their e-mail at least once a day. However, a large majority of private Members do not manage the influx of e-mails themselves. Rather, the task is given to their political staff. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents said that they answered the e-mails they receive from their electors, but this percentage drops to 62% for e-mails that come from outside of their riding. This trend is the same as that of Members of Congress: only half of them said they answered e-mails from outside their electoral districts. However, it should be noted that more Ministers (77%) answer messages from outside their electoral districts. This difference can be explained by the fact that Ministers' functions take them beyond their riding's boundaries.

	Table 2	Use of E-mail by Private Members			
	Newspapers	Party Members	Citizens' Groups	Other Private Members	Ministers
Often	11%	11%	13%	54%	20%
Sometimes	36%	40%	59%	29%	23%
Seldom	33%	23%	23%	17%	33%
Never	20%	26%	16%	0	24%

The time parliamentarians take to respond to e-mails is a problem. Only 23% respond within two days. The majority of them (58%) take up to a week to reply, which may be considered too long by net users who expect quasi-immediate responses. According to Michel Cailloux of the Canadian Information Office, although 87% of the public expect a response to a letter within two weeks of having sent it, 90% expect an answer to an e-mail within four hours of having sent it[3]. Ministers are faster in this respect; 44% of them answer e-mails within two days.

Unlike the representatives in the study of the American Congress, who considered e-mail to be less useful and of a poorer quality than post mail, 89% of Quebec parliamentarians think that the quality of e-mail messages is just as good as that of traditional mail, and more than two-thirds say that they think them to be as important as traditional mail because their contents are as articulate and precise as letters received in the mail.

How do Parliamentarians Use E-mail?

This table shows that in Quebec as in the United States, parliamentarians use the Internet more for internal than external communication because they use it most often to communicate with other parliamentarians and only occasionally with the media, party members, or lobby groups. A closer inspection reveals that private Members communicate more often with each other than do Ministers, with 87% of private Members saying that they often or sometimes use e-mail to contact other private Members, compared with 44% of Ministers who do. Also, federal respondents use e-mail more often than provincial ones to exchange information with newspapers (17% and 7%, respectively) and lobby groups (17% and 10%, respectively).

The Internet and the Democratic Process

Overall, Quebec parliamentarians can be considered cyber-optimists and seem to have a positive view of the role the Internet can play within the democratic process.

In two of the three positions offered to the respondents, the Ministers were more optimistic than the private Members about the benefits of the Internet; 100% of the former thought that the use of the Internet will help improve the democratic process, compared with 69% of the private Members. In addition, 89% of the Ministers thought that the Internet will allow for better control of institutions, whereas only 42% of private Members agreed with this view.

	Table 3	View of the Role of the Internet	
	Will Improvethe Democratic Process	Will Improve the Control of Institutions	Will Improve the Relationship Between Elected Representatives and the Public
Agree	35%	16%	26%
Somewhat agree	38%	32%	52%
Somewhat disagree	15%	32%	12%
Disagree	3%	9%	0

Conclusion

This first foray into this issue shows that the Internet is now very much a part of Quebec parliamentarians' work and that it is the e-mail function that dominates the communication between parliamentarians and the public. In this regard, they follow the trend found in the United States and France. However, unlike their counterparts from those countries, Quebec parliamentarians have a more positive opinion about the quality of messages that they receive through e-mail.

This technical innovation, however, creates new communication management problems, since parliamentarians risk being inundated with a flow of messages that are not all pertinent and not being able to respond to them within a reasonable time because of insufficient resources.

The Internet could improve the effectiveness of parliamentary work not only by facilitating the relationship between parliamentarians and their constituents, but also by bettering the quality of factual and technical information necessary to participate in discussions on bills, influence governmental decisions, and serve as a bridge between voters and the public administration. By using the search functions on government Internet sites, parliamentarians can find pertinent information more quickly, gain a better knowledge of the issues, and prepare their questions for the House or their work for committees.

Notes

1. Diana Owen, Richard Davis and Vincent James Strickler (1999), "Congress and the Internet" *Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics*, vol 4, no 2, 10-29.

2. www.netpolitique.net, (2001), "Les députés français et Internet"

3. These numbers are cited by Steven Clift, *The E-Democracy E-Book*, www.publicus.net, 2000, p.4.