
Adapting new Communication Technologies at the National Assembly

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This article starts by looking at how the National Assembly has harnessed communications technologies to engage the public and get them involved in democratic life. It then focusses on the various technological tools available to members and the President to support them in their work. The article concludes with a few thoughts about how communications technologies have a tangible impact on parliamentary business.



In 1964, Canadian philosopher and sociologist Marshall McLuhan first revealed his famous theory that would go on to revolutionize the world of communications: “The medium is the message.” At a time when the idea of a global communications network as sophisticated as the Internet was pure

science fiction, this simple, yet prophetic theory aptly described just how vital to our daily lives new technologies would gradually become as a means of communication.

Mindful of the impact on its image and the need to inform the public about parliamentary business, the National Assembly of Quebec has always strived to use technology to reach out to Quebeckers.

Services to the Public

October 3, 2013, will mark the 35th year of live broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings. The very first live broadcast of a sitting of the Assembly was in 1978. Then-president Clément Richard spoke of the significance of this innovation bringing the National Assembly into the electronic age, and he expressed his

wish to see it encourage all Quebeckers to take part in the democratic process. Not only did the arrival of cameras in the Chamber change the behaviour (and dress) of certain members, but it also forever changed the parliamentary landscape.

Since then, parliamentary proceedings have unfolded under the watchful eye of the camera, which over the past 35 years has witnessed the political careers of certain members. In March 2013, the Assembly, as a broadcaster, reached another critical milestone in its technological development by completing the switch to HDTV, a format it began exploring as early as 2006. Now, TV viewers in Quebec can now following the work of Assembly in HD.

For several years now, Internet users from around the world visiting the National Assembly’s website have been able to view live not only the proceedings of the Assembly and its committees, but also news conferences, special ceremonies and educational activities taking place at the Assembly.

On May 30, 2013, smartphone and tablet users were given access to the National Assembly’s brand new mobile website. The main sections of the Assembly’s website have been adapted to provide easier access to mobile web users. The mobile site provides access to a wide range of information, including backgrounders on the 125 members, the Assembly channel, daily events, a simple search function to look up a bill, and useful information about the National Assembly such as details about guided tours, restaurants, gift shop and library. This simple-to-use mobile site, accessible anywhere, provides the public with just one more way

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to participate in democratic life. Here is yet another window showing parliamentary life in real time. No matter where they are, mobile users can stay up to date on the goings on in the National Assembly and take part in its proceedings, watch live as members speak in the Chamber and in committee, track the progress of legislation and contact their elected member. This is in response to the public's growing needs and the constant challenge of bringing the Assembly closer to the people.

In April 2009, the National Assembly adopted parliamentary reform that laid the foundation for this initiative by encouraging public participation in parliamentary proceedings and the democratic process. In fall 2009 the National Assembly began allowing the tabling of electronic petitions signed through its website. Since then, over 200 petitions have travelled through cyberspace before being tabled in the Assembly. Despite the fact that electronic petitions make up only a quarter of the total number of petitions tabled in the Assembly over the past five years, they were the source of over half of all signatures received during this period. This simply provides more evidence that new technologies reach more members of the public, encourage their participation in democratic life and more effectively engage them in a given cause.

Another innovation that has helped improve and expand public participation in parliamentary proceedings is the use of videoconferencing in parliamentary committees. Committees had already made use of this technology in recent years to allow individuals unable to travel to a hearing to still be heard. For instance, witnesses from the Magdalen Islands and Nunavik were able to use teleconferencing to provide their insights. As this experience proved effective, use of this technology was incorporated into the National Assembly's rules for the conduct of proceedings. A witness may now request to appear by videoconference. The parliamentary committee in question then decides whether this would be permitted based on certain criteria, such as the witness's inability to appear or be represented in person and his or her testimony's contribution to committee business. Although this technology has been used on relatively few occasions, it has nevertheless been used a number of times since its inclusion in parliamentary reform to hear from witnesses in the Gaspé, Abitibi and even as far away as Japan.

Not only do new technologies facilitate communications, but they can also be environmentally friendly by reducing paper use. In keeping with the Assembly's push toward sustainable development, the requirement to submit

25 copies of a brief has been replaced by the option to submit a single copy in either paper or electronic form. Past experience has shown that there is significant public interest in online consultations, in terms of both numbers and quality. As a result, this form of consultation has also been incorporated into Assembly practices. In connection with an order of initiative, a committee may now launch an online consultation on the Assembly website. The National Assembly may also call for such consultations to be held when giving a committee the mandate to conduct a general consultation. Since the reform was adopted, six online consultations have given 11,642 individuals the opportunity to be heard by completing questionnaires on the website.

In addition to these online consultations, individuals now have the option to comment on any bill or mandate carried out by a parliamentary committee. The public is encouraged to participate in a number of ways, meaning that parliamentarians can benefit from public input and hear their concerns when it comes time to study measures referred to a committee for consideration.

The Assembly website, which first came online in 1995, plays an increasingly important role in informing and engaging the public in parliamentary proceedings. It was overhauled in March 2010 so it could more effectively carry out these new tasks.

Another new feature now allows web users to subscribe to various RSS newsfeeds. This technology automatically updates a site or webpage as soon as it is posted online. This means that users can stay up to date in real time about any changes to the agendas or mandates of parliamentary committees, the legislative process regarding any bill, and press conferences.

These days, any discussion about communications technologies necessarily includes social media. After serious consideration, the National Assembly finally got on board last fall with this new set of communications tools. Since then, its presence on Facebook and the microblogging site Twitter has been included in its daily communications channels, providing web users with a new, interactive way to stay on top of parliamentary and institutional developments.

The Assembly uses Facebook and Twitter to promote its activities, refer to its website and announce major parliamentary initiatives. It also uses these platforms as tools to educate web users about Quebec's parliamentary traditions, present archival treasures, publicize thousands of library documents, and much more. These new tools come with guidelines on how they are to be used by Assembly staff.

The Assembly website now also serves as an exceptional cultural and archival showcase, giving web users access to various virtual exhibits presented by the National Assembly Library. For instance, web users can visit the exhibit *Gouverner en Nouvelle-France*, which celebrates the 350th anniversary of the Sovereign Council and presents the political institutions of the French colonial system by presenting archival records and heritage artifacts from the National Assembly's collections. The exhibit *Récits de voyages du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* presents some of the most treasured travel accounts in the Library's collection. These exhibits are in addition to those commemorating the 50th anniversary of the death of former premier Maurice Duplessis, the 100th anniversary of the founding of *Le Devoir* and the 125th anniversary of the Parliament Buildings. The exhibit *Les trésors de la bibliothèque*, assembled for the 400th anniversary of the foundation of Quebec City, provides web visitors with electronic access to over 20 literary treasures from the Library's collection, including a number of rare manuscripts such as a book of writings by Saint Thomas Aquinas dating from 1472 and two volumes of the 1574 *Le Théâtre des cités du monde* presenting period colour illustrations of major European cities.

Services to Members and the Presiding Officers

While there has been a major shift in public usage patterns and expectations in the era of electronic communications, this is all the more true for parliamentarians, who themselves are more present and active than ever on the Web and in social media networks.

For this reason, in order to meet their needs, a working group was formed in spring 2012 at the Assembly's initiative. The working group included representatives from each party, along with officials from the Computer Services and Telecommunications Directorate and the Associate General Secretariat for Administration. This allowed the working group to discuss the computer equipment and telecommunications services provided to parliamentarians so they could plan requirements for the following legislature. Its meetings made it possible to develop a service proposal more closely tailored to the needs of the members for the 40th legislature.

These days, the buzzword describing the technological needs of the members is "mobility." This is why the Assembly now provides each member with a selection of smartphone and tablet brands and models from a list approved by the Computer Services, Debate Broadcasting and Telecommunications Directorate. As well, for their parliamentary and riding offices, each member receives a total of four laptops and one desktop computer.

In addition to being available in all Parliament Buildings to all members and visitors to the Assembly, Wi-Fi is now available in each riding office. A private Wi-Fi connection allows members and their staff to connect directly to the National Assembly network, while a public Wi-Fi connection provides visitors with free Internet access.

A brand new cloud-based data storage application was designed specifically for members. Named "PartageWeb," this program provides each member with access to a "data cloud" where members and their parliamentary or riding office staff can store data. They can archive files, transfer images, add calendar entries or access a contact list. They can also manage cases submitted to them by constituents. The members can be notified by email of the various files stored in their cloud account. Wherever they are in the world, at the end of the day they can be notified by email about developments on various riding issues and review new requests or cases that have been settled, for example. As for document confidentiality, unlike similar applications, these private cloud-based accounts, accessible only with an e-token, are highly secure and the contents are stored entirely on National Assembly servers.

This computer program was added to the Clerk's site, which for a few years now has been available to the members of parliamentary committees. A kind of virtual library, this controlled-access site is accessible from any computer. It contains all documents useful to committee members, including the text of bills being considered; proposed, adopted, defeated or withdrawn amendments; briefs submitted; meeting agendas; draft reports; and any results of online public consultations and comments received. Before, all these documents were provided to committee members in paper format; now when a document is placed on the Clerk's site, committee members are invited by email to access the site to retrieve it. Not only is this fast and efficient, but it is environmentally friendly as well.

In the wake of the electronic shift taken at the start of the 40th legislature, and always with a view to improving our environmental footprint, it was agreed to adjust procedures to maximize the use of computer-based tools to get away from paper. This is why we have moved toward paperless meetings. Meetings in the Office of the National Assembly and the Secretary General with the President and his staff are now entirely computer-based. The meeting agendas and relevant documents are made accessible on a secure website, access to which is restricted to only those individuals involved. Attendees may also follow the

meeting proceedings on an electronic table without having to bring a pile of documents. This approach will also be rolled out for meetings held by the President and Vice-Presidents to discuss the organization of parliamentary proceedings.

With respect to parliamentary proceedings and innovations in technology and communications, the President and Vice-Presidents have not been left out. Since 2007, the clerks have had a new, fully computerized table. Each of the three clerks' desks is connected to two computers in a secure room outside the Blue Chamber. In case of computer malfunction, the clerks can then continue working on the second computer. In addition to allowing them to fill out the scroll (the "blues") and the time grids of the various speakers, the computers allow them to activate timers to inform members of their speaking time. The clerks' computer screens also display the feed on the Assembly channel. A printer is hidden inside the table so the clerks can quickly print any document required by the President. Mounted in a wooden piece of furniture placed in front of the President's chair is a computer screen where the President can read messages sent to him by the clerks. This messaging system is extremely useful since it allows the clerks to be in constant contact with the President while he is seated and discreetly send him vital information, for example so he can enforce the rules concerning speaking time remaining. Also in front of the President are two television screens displaying the Chamber proceedings as well as timers indicating speaking time.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, the Assembly aims to reduce paper use to a minimum in favour of electronic documents, which are easier to access and are more environmentally friendly. We are currently considering ways to modernize our parliamentary practices, including those relating to the tabling of documents in the Chamber. The Standing Orders of the

National Assembly currently state that at the opening of a session, the President of the Assembly must table a list of documents in the Assembly as required by law. During meetings, these documents are tabled by ministers or the President of the Assembly in paper format, under "Tabling of Papers" for routine proceedings. They are then scanned and published on the Assembly website. We would like instead to find a way to skip a step by allowing documents to be tabled electronically at the start, while at the same time respecting the principle that members be the first ones to be informed of their contents. Other legislative imperatives must be considered as well, including the requirement as stipulated in a number of statutes that a document must be tabled within a certain period following resumption of the Assembly when it is not sitting, or to produce a minimum number of paper copies of a document for retention purposes.

As well, the Standing Orders provide that "any member may require that a minister who has quoted from some paper, even if only in part, forthwith lay such paper upon the Table; and the minister must comply unless he is of the opinion that it would be injurious to the public interest to do so." To the extent that members, including members, are increasingly using their electronic tablets when speaking in the Chamber, a minister who quotes from an electronic document on his or her tablet could be compelled to table the document when requested to do so under this Standing Order. We would like to develop a procedure suited to these types of documents.

In closing, although our legislatures are deeply anchored in tradition and custom, the fact remains that they cannot ignore the technology and communications revolution. It is up to us to adapt so that we can use these technologies to reach out even more to constituents by keeping them informed and engaged in our proceedings, as well as support our efforts to more effectively carry out our duties.