



An exploration of the effectiveness for the citizen of Web-based systems of communicating UK parliamentary and devolved assembly information

Rita Marcella,^a Graeme Baxter,^{a,*} and Nick Moore^b

^a*Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen AB10 7QE, UK*

^b*Acumen, Brompton Ralph, Taunton TA4 2RU, UK*

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Abstract

This article reports on an exploratory study, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, which investigated the impact of technology on the communication of parliamentary information to the general public. This study tested the application of a new data collection tool: an interactive, electronically assisted interview that was taken out across the UK as part of a pilot roadshow to organizations such as public libraries, community centers, sheltered accommodation, and universities. Here, members of the public were invited to explore and respond to the Web sites of the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, and the National Assembly for Wales. During these sessions, online activities were recorded in a data transaction log, while search behavior and verbal responses were coded in a protocol analysis approach. The article provides full details of the results of these interactive interviews. They appear to indicate that the availability of information in readily accessible electronic form is insufficient alone to encourage citizen participation. Other motivators and forms of support are required to encourage and enable people to access, use, and apply that information and to encourage them to use technology to interact with democracy.

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* Corresponding author. Information Management Division, Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen, Scotland AB10 7QE, UK. Tel.: +44-1224-263-889; fax: +44-1224-263-939.

E-mail addresses: r.c.marcella@rgu.ac.uk (R. Marcella), g.baxter@rgu.ac.uk (G. Baxter).

1. Introduction and background to the research

In recent years, there has been a dynamic change in the ways in which the UK government envisages and increasingly realizes communication with the citizen. This new vision has emerged from widely held notions of the “information society,” more recently the “knowledge society,” and of the role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) may play in facilitating, even encouraging, public interaction with and participation in democracy. The ethos of transparency and openness as desirable features of a model of sound government communication with the citizen, which would result in positive attitudes and greater involvement, came initially in Europe from the ideas expressed in the Sutherland Report, which found that the major obstacle to achieving consensus between Brussels and the European public lay less in the lack of information than in the lack of transparency with which existing information was disseminated to the individual (Sutherland, 1992). Similar views are to be found in all developed societies, as signaled in 1997 with the announcement by Clinton and Gore that “for the first time in history, the White House will be connected to you [the citizens of the United States] via electronic mail,” manifesting a belief that the electronic enablement of communication would support democracy. Such reports reflect a growing political belief that improved access by the public to information about government would enable those less well represented, and less inclined to participate, to find a voice (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, 1998; Policy Studies Institute, 1995). As a result of such theories, the UK government has made a commitment to “information age government,” with a promise that all government dealings with the public should be deliverable electronically by 2005 (Blair, 2000). The UK government’s strategic framework for e-government (Cabinet Office, 2000) emphasizes the role of electronic networks in the achievement of an improved relationship between the government and the people, through “trusted and respected institutions,” such as public libraries and post offices (Howarth, 2001). A UK online citizen portal has also been established (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002a) as a single point of entry to government information services, although there is already a realization that the exponential growth and wide diversity of government initiated Web sites has created a bewildering array of uncoordinated opportunities for the information seeker. As a result, guidelines have been established to encourage greater standardization of sites and to ensure that their content is “engaging, accessible and usable, providing information and services that users want” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002b). While this constitutes welcome evidence that there is a need for a better understanding of the ways in which users might evaluate a government Web site, there has been, to date, little in the way of critical research into evaluation measures, nor of analysis of the theoretical base. How do we, therefore, test the validity of such theories, in the context of recently emerging evidence of decreasing involvement as shown by the very low levels of voter turnout at recent national, local, and European elections in the UK (BBC, 1999, 2002; Gould, 2001).

The research project discussed here was carried out at a time of dramatic constitutional change in the UK: Scotland had recently elected its first parliament in almost 300 years, with primary legislation and tax varying powers; Wales had established its own National Assembly, albeit less powerful than the Scottish Parliament; while the New Northern Ireland

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