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## Opportunities for Greater Consultation?

House Committee Use of Information and Communication Technology

## John Baczynski

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THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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# Opportunities for Greater Consultation? House Committee Use of Information and Communication Technology

## John Baczynski*

### INTRODUCTION

The year 2007 marked 20 years since Australia's House of Representatives moved to establish a comprehensive committee system that aligned its committees with all federal government departments, giving the House 'the capacity to monitor' the work of these departments and instrumentalities.[1] It also marked 10 years since the committees went online, giving a far broader audience than before access to committee information. Since the late 1990s, the way that information is distributed and used online has evolved, with Web 2.0 technologies now making it easier for people to create online content, share information and contribute to online discussion forums, opinion polls and debates. As the ways in which information is distributed have undergone enormous change globally, so have parliamentary committees instituted changes in how they choose to consult the public and distribute information. The 20th anniversary of the Australian House of Representatives committee system is a fitting time to observe House committees' use of technology and the challenges the committees face when integrating information and communication technology into their deliberations.

This paper explores the use of information and communication technology by House committees during the 41st Parliament (October 2004 to November 2007) and whether the technology could be used to provide additional online avenues of engagement for committees. Specifically, the paper investigates the impact of the technology on the democratic process; provides examples of the technologies that have already been adopted by House committees; explores the effects of new communication technolo-

gies on House committee procedures; and asks what can be learned from the United Kingdom, where parliamentary committees were early adopters of computer-assisted deliberations.

### THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY ON THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The term Web 2.0[2] is used to collectively describe a second generation of internet communication technologies that provide interactive online environments. Web 2.0 technologies make it easy for users to contribute information to, and personalise, websites. The emergence of interactive information and communication technologies has given House committees the opportunity to reassess the flow of communication during committee inquiries, and may provide an alternative avenue for the committees to engage with relevant groups in the community regardless of their physical location.

Debate on the impact of communication technology on the democratic process precedes the existence of Web 2.0 technologies, and provides a useful starting point for discussion of their impact on House committees. Scott Wright identifies three main schools of thought on the technology–democracy discourse. First are the 'revolutionaries' who argue that 'the Internet can and will transform our democratic system'.[3] They say that information and communication technology allows a direct form of democracy where large numbers of citizens can participate directly in policy making; they predict that the new technology will ultimately render representative democracy obsolete.[4] However, since these revolutionary ideas were articulated in the late 1990s,

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the sudden obsolescence of representative forms of democracy has yet to occur. The second school, which Wright refers to as the 'reformers',[5] maintains that technology can reinvigorate democracy by providing technical fixes to problems identified within the current representative system. The reformers believe that technology can be used to strengthen traditional practices or support representative democracy through computer-aided participatory and deliberative tools. The third group asserts that political institutions will normalise information and communication technology into already established structures and thus that the technology will have limited impact. This position is based on empirical studies showing that mainstream political actors are quick to adopt new technology and integrate it into the traditional political world.[6] Wright does not assign a name to this group but for the purposes of this paper I will refer to them as the 'regulators'.[7] The regulators argue that established and powerful institutional arrangements not only shape, but also resist, change, particularly if it will result in the loss of institutional power or control. They paint the pessimistic view that the institutions that are driving technological change are doing so in pursuit of their own interests, with the aim of asserting control over technology to 'neutralise any pluralist tendencies of the new media'.[8]

While this paper does not scrutinise theories on technological democratic reform in detail, the revolutionary–reformer–regulator framework is a useful point of reference when observing how technology has been integrated into House committees and which new technologies committees might use in the future. It is important to note that there is no evidence to suggest that the current use of information and communication technology is undermining representative structures and practices as the revolutionaries predicted. However, the question of whether the reforming potential of the technology is being realised by House committees, or whether the technology is being used, rather, to reinforce and regulate existing power structures, remains unanswered. Ultimately, whether House committees are technological regulators or reformers will be determined by which technologies House committees are empowered to use and how they choose to use them.

## TECHNOLOGIES USED BY COMMITTEES DURING THE 41ST PARLIAMENT

Static websites provide information at set points in time, that is, when web administrators upload documents to a site. In contrast, dynamic websites have the ability to display content as it is created and may be configured to allow multiple users to contribute content to the site. Throughout the 41st Parliament, each House committee maintained a webpage that provided access to static information such as committee reports, inquiry submissions and transcripts of evidence. These pages were accessed through a dedicated House of Representatives committee area within the parliament's main website.[9] Responsibility for publishing information on the webpages was devolved to staff within each committee secretariat, who were also responsible for ensuring that information such as committee membership details remained current.[10]

The 'Committee activities (inquiries and reports)'[11] section of each committee's website contained the highest proportion of current information and was updated as events occurred or as committee submissions or reports were authorised for publication.[12] Information about past inquiries was also available online, although it was generally limited to committees that had been in existence since 1996.[13]

Internally, House committees used a number of information and communication technologies—internal databases, intranets, sharepoint sites, email, electronic document management systems—to facilitate communication between committee members and secretariat staff and to maintain databases of committee-related information. Externally, however, they used only static methods of communication, such as webpages and email 'mail-outs', to communicate information online to an outside audience. The content of House committee websites was tightly controlled, with a generic email address on each committee's webpage providing the only facility to allow end users to interact online with House committees.[14]

Controlling the information presented on a committee website is an example of a 'top-down' communication model where end users of the site have no means of contributing information directly to the site.[15] Such a system is well suited to controlling information that must undergo a formal authorisation process by the committee before it is published, such as submissions.[16] While this is a mechanism to ensure that information presented to the committee is handled appropriately, the failure to provide online avenues for interaction with the committees could be viewed as a way of exerting tight control over the technology in order to maintain power, as the regulator perspective suggests. Yet, without House committee websites, committee reports, submissions and transcripts of evidence would not be as accessible to the public. While placing such documents online gives the committee process a previously unknown level of transparency and accessibility, this model does not provide the opportunity to utilise the 'bottom-up' deliberative potential of Web 2.0 technologies.[17]

## ONLINE CONSULTATIONS?

House committees spend a significant amount of time consulting and deliberating.[18] Tasks such as the collection of evidence have traditionally been undertaken in face-to-face forums such as public hearings and private briefings. This requires all parties involved to be in the same physical location, although in instances where this is not possible, House committees are empowered to use video conferencing.[19] Consultation is an essential aspect of a committee's work, but the time pressures committee members face make it increasingly difficult for them to balance the time spent collecting evidence with their other parliamentary duties. The reformist perspective argues for a technical fix to help committee members engage with witnesses while freeing them from the need to be in the same physical location as the witnesses, or from having to take part in discussions at exactly the same time. This potentially has the additional advantage of allowing committee members to engage with communities and individuals who would not interact with committees through the traditional mechanisms.

In its 1998 report on the House committee system, the Standing Committee on Procedure expressed its intention to integrate communication technology with committee procedures. The report recommended that:

> The existing procedures relating to the use of electronic communication devices by committees be reviewed by the Standing Committee on Procedure prior to the end of the 39th Parliament with a view to their incorporation in the standing orders. (Recommendation 22)

> The standing orders be amended to recognise, as evidence, documents received by committees by electronic means. (Recommendation 23)[20]

These recommendations reflected the House of Representatives' intention to accept electronic documents as evidence for a committee inquiry, and to permit video-conferencing technology to be used to take evidence from witnesses and allow committee members to participate in hearings when in remote locations. Standing Order 339 was amended on 6 December 2000 to reflect this change:

> A committee may resolve to conduct proceedings using audio visual or audio links with Members of the committee or witnesses not present in one place. If an audio visual or audio link is used Committee Members and witnesses must be able to speak to and hear each other at the same time regardless of location.[21]

Incorporating this provision into the standing orders gave House committees another avenue to gather formal evidence and reflected the intention to allow committees to use appropriate technologies in their deliberations. It also set a precedent in allowing those formally interacting with a committee to be in separate locations. Since this amendment there have been no additional moves to revise the standing orders to allow House committees to incorporate more recent advances in electronic communication technologies, such as online discussion forums, blogs or feedback forms. However, a 2001 Procedure Committee report says that committee websites 'will eventually incorporate a "Have your say" facility enabling people to submit their views in relation to particular committee inquiries'.[22] Providing user feedback forms on committee websites would be relatively simple, and online forums could be used to collect evidence and views for particular committee inquiries. However, before new communication technologies can be incorporated into committee websites, their impact on the way evidence is gathered must be considered, together with the protections for those providing evidence.

In 1994, when the Procedure Committee first proposed allowing committees to use audio-video links to conduct formal hearings, the impact this would have on the evidence collection process was considered in detail. Foremost was the question of whether information taken from a remote witness would be protected by parliamentary privilege.[23] While it was argued that such evidence would be covered by parliamentary privilege, this was contingent on the witness remaining within the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Parliament, as overseas witnesses providing evidence via video link would be subject to the laws of the country in which they were located.[24]

The committee also considered other aspects of the process, such as how remote witnesses would be sworn in; whether remote members would be counted as contributing to a quorum; and whether the technology limited the subtleties of communication and rapport building to the extent that it would affect the quality of the evidence presented. The report raised concerns that over-reliance on the technology might result in fewer committee hearings being conducted outside Parliament House. It concluded that the opportunity it provided for increased flexibility and effectiveness was beneficial, while stressing that the use of technology required careful consideration in each instance to ensure that the quality of the evidence remained high and that the 'continued application of the necessary safeguards for members of the public' was maintained.[25]

It is evident when reviewing the integration of video-conferencing technology with committee procedures that the application of the technology has closely followed the procedures and practices of conventional, in-person hearings. Even though

participants may be in different places during video-linked hearings, the hearings take place in the same manner as when all participants are in the same location. This would not be the case if some of the more recent technologies were used during formal committee hearings. The flow of information for online discussions, for example, is very different to that for formally structured face-to-face consultations. Like video-link deliberations, online discussion forums do not require all parties to be present in the same location, but unlike them, and depending on how the deliberations are conducted, not all parties taking place in the discussion would necessarily be online at the same time. If committees were to attempt to conduct a formal hearing in such a manner, there would be a number of obvious breaches to the rules governing formal proceedings. For example, maintaining a quorum would be hard to monitor in an online environment, due to the difficulty of ensuring that all members were logged on and in front of their computers throughout all stages of the consultation. Verifying the identity of those giving evidence online would also be difficult, due to the anonymous nature of online interactions. As with video-conferencing technology, consideration of the application of parliamentary privilege would be of particular importance, especially if those interacting online were physically outside Australia.

Such impediments to the holding of formal hearings online suggest that replicating current practice may not be achievable and, as a result, that House committees may only be able to provide a 'regulated' online environment. But the strengths of the technology must also be emphasised: its potential to engage online communities that would not interact with a committee through the traditional communication channels; and its potential to reduce the time burden on members. This is not to suggest that formal hearings should be replaced entirely, and if the evidence gathered online were not of sufficiently high quality, then online deliberations could actually turn out to impose an additional time burden on members.

## HOUSE COMMITTEES' USE OF ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES

During the 41st Parliament, House committees did not have any facilities to deliberate formally online. Nevertheless, the Standing Committee on Health and Aging took the unusual step of using external online forums to gather evidence during this period. In its 2007 Inquiry into the Benefits of Breastfeeding, the Committee for Health and Aging 'utilised several parenting websites with online forums as a

means to promote the inquiry and to observe current community perspectives on the topic'.[26] It specifically sought information from mothers who where having trouble breastfeeding, as the committee had identified this group as being under-represented in the evidence gathered for the inquiry to that point. The sites approached included the Australian Breastfeeding Association, BellyBelly and Bub Hub.[27] In addition, the secretary of the Health and Aging Committee registered as a user on some sites and posted a message promoting the inquiry and asking users to submit submissions directly to the committee. These tactics proved successful, with the secretary reporting a surge in submissions on the topics that had been under-represented in the evidence until then.[28]

While the experiment could be deemed a success, the style of the submissions and the information they contained varied widely. For example, BellyBelly conducted an online poll to gather information from its members and made a supplementary submission to the inquiry that consisted of a series of forum postings. The way in which the information was presented in the submission made it difficult to identify the authors of the postings, as contributors were identified only by their online names. While the forum did not strictly follow the guidelines on how to construct a submission, BellyBelly's submission was nevertheless accepted by the committee in the form of a printed screenshot that documented each of the comments to the forum at a set point in time.[29] Even after the submission was accepted, the forum remained open and further comments were made to the discussion online. While the submission formally accepted by the committee was protected by parliamentary privilege, any later comments would not have been, since they were not included with the authorised submission. This highlights the difficulty of applying parliamentary privilege to information that is created dynamically in an online environment. Moreover, the submission did not indicate the location of each person who had contributed to the forum, raising potential issues of jurisdiction in applying parliamentary privilege to contributors who may have been outside Australia.

While the experiment conducted by the Health and Aging Committee is unique among House committees, it shows that online audiences can be targeted and that they will respond to committees' requests for feedback. It also highlights the differences between traditional submissions and submissions based on information that has been created in an online context, forcing committees to reconsider the forms in which evidence can be presented. In this and other respects, the Health and Aging Committee can be considered to have taken a reformist

approach to the use of information technology to aid its deliberations.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS ONLINE COMMITTEE CONSULTATIONS

The United Kingdom's House of Commons was an early adopter of online consultations, having experimented with the medium since 1998.[30] However, despite these early experiments, a report produced by the Information Committee in July 2002 emphasised the need for the UK parliament to make better use of information and communication technology, to help members engage with the public more effectively. It recommended that the House of Commons adopt the following set of principles.

A    The House is committed to the use of ICT [information and communication technology] to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.

B    The House is committed to using ICT to enhance the professionalism of Members, their staff and House staff in all aspects of parliamentary life.

C    The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.

D    The House recognises the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.

E    The House will develop and share good practice in the use of ICT by other parliamentary and governmental bodies both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and will work in collaboration with outside bodies.[31]

Points A and C in particular indicate a reformist approach in advocating the use of technology to facilitate communication between the parliament and the public. A number of House of Commons committees now use online tools to interact with the public, with an increasing number running online consultations in conjunction with their inquiries.[32]

The Hansard Society is an independent non-partisan organisation that has facilitated a number of online consultations for the House of Commons through its Tell Parliament website.[33] These include the Defence Committee's inquiry into Educating Service Children,[34] the Select Committee on Modernisation's inquiry into Modernisation of the

House of Commons[35] and the Science and Technology Committee's inquiry into Human Reproductive Technologies.[36] Each was advertised by the committee concerned and ran for a specified period during which participants could register their details and contribute to an online discussion forum.[37] Participants were required to abide by a set of rules (see Appendix 1), and postings were moderated by the Hansard Society before becoming publicly viewable on the forum.

The moderator's tight control over the information placed on these forums reinforces a regulator perspective of the restricted and regulated use of technology. However, the decision to administer and moderate the forums through an independent third party (the Hansard Society) somewhat weakens the regulator argument, because the use of an apolitical body effectively removes any perception of political prejudice from the decision as to which postings to publish. In such an environment those contributing to the forums, whether they are members of the committee or members of the public, are on equal terms, as neither decides which comments are suitable for posting.

Tell Parliament is not the only site to host online consultations for House of Commons committees; in recent years, the House of Commons appears to have brought its online consultations in-house through the use of the UK parliament-administered eConsultations.[38] The Defence Committee's inquiry into Medical Care for Armed Forces,[39] for example, was conducted as an eConsultation, although its earlier inquiry into Educating Service Children was hosted by Tell Parliament. Like Tell Parliament postings, eConsultation postings are moderated before they are uploaded for public viewing; the moderation process is also similar, with comments having to conform to a set of rules (see Appendix 2). The online interface of the sites is similar, with both providing a discussion board listing a number of topics suggested by the committee in question. The major difference between the two sites is that Tell Parliament consultations are moderated by Hansard Society staff whereas contributions to eConsultations appear to be moderated by staff of the House of Commons. Whether or not it is actually the case, it appears that comments posted to an eConsultation forum are moderated by committee members,[40] a perception that may discourage some people from contributing to the discussion. In contrast, Tell Parliament clearly indicates that its moderators are not committee members or parliamentary staff.

Both Tell Parliament and eConsultations are reformist in the sense that they use technology to broaden the avenues for members of the public to engage with committee processes. They also give committee members an additional mechanism to

gather evidence and canvass community views among groups of particular interest to an inquiry. However, their use of technology can also be viewed through a more pessimistic regulator perspective, as both sites retain tight control over who can participate and, to some extent, what participants can say. The decision by the House of Commons to moderate its own consultations further strengthens the regulator assertion that institutions attempt to control technology in order to maintain their own interests.

While this may be so, the requirement for committees to follow parliamentary procedures when collecting formal evidence, and the difficulty of applying these rules to online consultations, cannot be dismissed. The provision of a framework endowed with a set of rules to inform both the posting and the moderating of comments is useful, as it ensures that the information collected for committee consultations remains relevant to the topic and within the boundaries of what is considered appropriate. Moreover, a strict registration system that requires users to submit personal information not only assists the committee to identify who is providing the evidence but also discourages individuals from posting information under a number of online identities. If information provided online is to be protected by parliamentary privilege, such a controlled environment is essential. Therefore, these examples of online consultations cannot easily be placed in either the reformer or the regulator category.

## CONCLUSION

The 20th anniversary of the House of Representatives committee system coincided with a transformation in how committees communicate and present information. Today, each House committee maintains an online presence where it provides detailed information on the work of the committee. While this provides a level of transparency that previously did not exist, House committees are not taking advantage of the additional opportunities available for them to improve committee deliberations through a wider use of information and communication technologies. In this respect, it appears that House committees are regulating the technology and are not willing to reform committee deliberations.

In 2000, amendments to the standing orders allowed House committees to use video conferencing. While this was a move in the reformist direction, House committees still have a long way to go if they are to be seen as true reformers of committees' communication and deliberation practices—particularly when compared with the United Kingdom, which began experimenting with online consultations in 1998.

The Health and Aging Committee's use of external discussion forums to gather evidence for its inquiry into breastfeeding marked an encouraging step towards reform. The committee was successful in identifying a target online audience and obtaining a large volume of relevant evidence for its inquiry. But this experiment also revealed a number of issues in relation to the collection of evidence through online forums, particularly the difficulty of verifying the identity and location of participants and of extending parliamentary privilege online. To protect those providing evidence, it became evident that tighter control over online consultations might be necessary.

The United Kingdom's House of Commons was an early adopter of online consultations and has since refined its approach to conducting consultations online. House of Commons committees have at their disposal online discussion boards specific to each inquiry. These are run according to a strict set of rules and the identities of participants are recorded. However, it appears that the recent move away from an independent third party to moderate these discussions could be perceived as excessive regulation and may discourage participation.

Regardless of the specific differences in implementation, each of the examples presented in this paper shows that online communities are willing to use new technologies to express their views to committees. Therefore, House committees may wish to examine more closely how they choose to communicate in the networked communication age and whether or not to provide online opportunities for greater consultation.

## APPENDIX 1
## Rules for online consultations administered by the Hansard Society

To ensure users feel safe and keen to participate, please:

1. Do not use insulting, threatening or provoking language.
2. Do not incite hatred on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality or sexuality or other personal characteristic.
3. Do not swear, use hate-speech or make obscene or vulgar comments.
4. Do not break the law. This includes libel, condoning illegal activity and contempt of court (comments which might affect the outcome of an approaching court case). You may post a small amount of third-party material, but please help us to avoid breaching copyright by naming its author and publication. We are unable to investigate all third party material, so where possible, please provide a link instead.
5. Do not engage in spamming. Please do not add the same comment to more than one forum.
6. Do not advertise. You can mention relevant, non-commercial websites as long as they support your comment.

*Source:* http://www.tellparliament.net/modernisation/forum/discussion_rules.

## APPENDIX 2
## Rules for online consultations administered by e-Consultations

Keep your comments relevant to the discussion topic.

Do not submit defamatory comments (comments that are untrue and capable of damaging the reputation of a person or organisation).

Do not condone illegal activity or incite people to commit any crime, including incitement of racial hatred.

Do not submit comments that could prejudice ongoing or forthcoming court proceedings (contempt of court) or break a court injunction.

Do not submit comments containing someone else's copyright material.

Do not swear or use language that could offend other forum participants.

Do not otherwise submit comments that are unlawful, harassing, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive. This includes comments that are offensive to others with regards to religion, gender, nationality or other personal characteristic.

Do not impersonate other forum Members or falsely claim to represent a person or organisation.

Do not submit comments that contain personal information that would identify yourself or others. For example last names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses or other online contact details either relating to yourself or other individuals.

Do not post comments in languages other than English.

Do not advertise or promote products or services.

Do not spam or flood the forum. Only submit a comment once. Do not resubmit the same, or similar, comments. Keep the number of comments you submit on a topic at a reasonable level. Multiple comments from the same individual, or a small number of individuals, may discourage others from contributing.

Do not use an inappropriate user name (vulgar, offensive etc.).

If you are aged 16 or under please get your parent/guardian's permission before participating in this forum. Users without this consent are not allowed to participate or provide us with personal information.

Comments will be pre-moderated before being posted on the discussion forum. If a comment contravenes any of the discussion rules it will not appear on the forum and will be returned to the participant by e-mail, along with a reference to the rule(s) contravened. The participant will be invited to resubmit their comment, after making appropriate changes, but a participant who repeatedly submits comments which contravene the discussion rules will have their account closed.

*Source:* http://forums.parliament.uk/html/rules.html.

## NOTES

1  I.C. Harris, B.C. Wright and P.E. Fowler (eds), *House of Representatives Practice*, fifth edition, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2005, p. 623.

2  The term loosely describes communication technologies that allow online discussion and collaboration. While this technology has existed since the 1990s, it mainly refers to 'new' online social networking technologies such as Facebook (www.facebook.com), YouTube (www.youtube.com) and MySpace (www.myspace.com). See also 'Microsoft eyes stake in Facebook', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 2007, http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/09/25/1190486262533.html. Note that all sites referred to in this paper were accessed between December 2007 and January 2008.

3  Scott Wright, 'Electrifying democracy? 10 years of policy and practice', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2): 236–49, 2006, p. 237.

4  ibid. See also Stephen Ward and Thierry Vedel, 'Introduction: the potential of the internet revisited', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2): 210–25, 2006, p. 210.

5  Wright, op. cit. p. 237. Pedersen and Saglie refer to this group as 'cyber-optimists'; see Karina Pedersen and Jo Saglie, 'New technology in ageing parties: internet use in Danish and Norwegian parties', *Party Politics*, 11(3): 359–77, 2005, p. 359. See also J. Shahin and C. Neuhold, '"Connecting Europe": the use of "new" information and communications technologies within European parliament standing committees', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3): 388–402, 2007, p. 391.

6  Ward and Vedel, op. cit., p. 210; Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual? The Cyberspace Revolution*, Sage, Thousand Oaks CA, 2000.

7  Pedersen and Saglie call them 'cyber-pessimists'; see Pedersen and Saglie, op. cit., p. 359.

8  Ward and Vedel, op. cit., p. 210.

9  See http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/comm_list.htm#standing.

10  See, for example, http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/primind/Members.htm.

11  See, for example, http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/atsia/reports.htm.

12  See, for example, http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/atsia/reports.htm. Committee reports, inquiry submissions, media releases and public hearing schedules are among the documents provided on these pages.

13  Work is under way to digitise the reports of all committees that existed before 1996 in an effort to make them digitally available.

14  In contrast, the United Kingdom's House of Commons Defence Committee not only provides static information online about the committee, but is also experimenting with more sophisticated information and communication technologies to enable more deliberative modes of communication and consultation through online forums.

15  Pippa Norris, 'Preaching to the converted? Pluralism, participation and party websites', *Party Politics*, 9(1): 21–45, 2003, p. 26; Parliament of Victoria Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy: Report on the Evidence Obtained in North America, August 2004*, Government Printer for the State of Victoria, Melbourne, 2004, p. 5.

16  House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders*, Canberra, 29 March 2006, Standing Order 242.

17  For a discussion of the potential of new information and communication technologies in a parliamentary context, see Shahin and Neuhold, op. cit., p. 391.

18  For the 12-month period from July 2007 to June 2008, House committees met 150 times; see Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual Report 2007–08*, Canberra, 2008, Appendix 3.

19  House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders*, Canberra, 29 March 2006, Standing Order 235.

20  House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Ten Years On: A Review of the House of Representatives Committee System*, Canberra, May 1998, p. 31.

21  House of Representatives, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 160, 6 December 2000, p. 1,985. Note that Standing Order 339 was renumbered Standing Order 235 as of the 41st parliament.

22  House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Promoting Community Involvement in the Work of Committees, Conference of Committee Chairs, Deputy Chairs and Secretaries*, Canberra, May 2001, p. 11.

23  Parliamentary privilege provides committee members and others participating formally in committee hearings, such as witnesses, legal protection for anything they may say during the proceedings. Written evidence received by a committee is similarly protected. See House of Representatives, *Infosheet 4*, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/infosheets/is04.pdf, and House of Representatives, *Infosheet 5*, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/infosheets/is05.pdf.

24  House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Application of Modern Technology to Committee Proceedings: Report*, Canberra, November 1994, p. 3.

25  ibid., p. 11.

26  House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Aging, *The Best Start Report on the Inquiry into the Health Benefits of Breastfeeding*, Canberra, August 2007, p. 5.

27  Respectively http://www.lrc.asn.au/, http://www.bubhub.com.au and http://bellybelly.com.au/.

28  The 479 submissions received by the committee are listed at http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/haa/breastfeeding/subs.htm.

29  See 'Preparing a submission', available at http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/documnts/howsub.pdf, and Supplementary Submission No. 441, available at http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/haa/breastfeeding/subs.htm.

30  See Stephen Coleman, 'Connecting parliament to the public via the internet: two case studies of online consultations', *Information, Communications and Society*, 7(1): 1–22, 2004.

31  House of Commons Information Committee, *Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public*, London, 8 July 2002, pp. 7–8.
32  For details of the online consultations conducted by the House of Commons, see http://forums.parliament.uk/html/index.html and http://www.tellparliament.net/.
33  For further information on the Hansard Society, see http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/. For online consultations administered by the Hansard Society, see: http://www.tellparliament.net/.
34  See http://defcom.tellparliament.net/.
35  See http://www.tellparliament.net/modernisation/.
36  See http://www.tellparliament.net/scitech/.
37  The consultation period for the Defence Committee's inquiry into Defence Education, for example, was 18 April to 26 May 2006.
38  See http://forums.parliament.uk/html/index.html.
39  See http://forums.parliament.uk/html/defence-medicalpage.html.
40  Comments from committee members are presented on the eConsultations message board with a 'Commons Moderator' logo next to the text of the message; see, for example, http://forums.parliament.uk/defence-recruitment/index.php?read,1,186.

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