Internet Communications: A Challenge for Legislators

by Gianpaolo Panusa

In a federal political system, with many powers shared between different levels of government, it is imperative to continually explore new, more efficient lines of communication. Policy issues between jurisdictions can be dealt with more effectively when parliamentarians can utilize instantaneous methods of communication. As businesses and individual constituents begin to use electronic communication on a daily basis, they will insist that interaction will political representatives be available through an electronic medium. This article looks at both "one-way" communication for information retrieval and possibilities for "two-way" communication between parliamentarians across the country.

One of the main thoroughfares of the emerging "information highway" will certainly be that linkage of various computer networks collectively known as the "Internet." The Internet facilitates information access and retrieval at an enormously rapid and efficient rate, reducing the time required to locate information resources to a fraction of what traditional methods required. The Internet allows rapid communication over great distances. For example, electronic mail, documents, notes and memos can be transferred quickly and read by the recipient at his or her leisure. Even more, political colleagues across the country can utilize computer networks to exchange views and opinions concerning the latest policies which have been implemented in one jurisdiction and not another. Discussion and debate can take place over days or weeks without the need for one phone call or fax message. Further, politicians can maintain a more intimate relationship with constituents and constituent offices while away; electronic communication can allow constituent concerns to be recognized and responded to

Gianpaolo Panusa recently completed the British Columbia Legislative Internship Program. He is presently a law student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

quickly. In short, the Internet, *as it currently exists,* provides parliamentarians with the opportunity to enhance the processes of policy and politics through a new, powerful method of communication. Indeed, the Federal government has recognized the growing importance of electronic communication by establishing the Information Highway Council, which includes 25 representatives from industry, labour and consumer groups, discussing technology, affordability, and privacy issues. The establishment of such a council reflects the fact that computer networks will play a substantial role in the future of Canadian information infrastructure.

One Way Communication

A variety of government-related information is accessible on the Internet via the gopher protocol. Gopher allows information to be retrieved from a variety of sources through a series of menus in a "seamless" fashion; it appears as though the information is emanating from one location. Such "one-way" communication, accessible through the Internet, is useful to various researchers at the legislative level, as well as to members of the public in general. A few useful federal and provincial government-related gophers are listed below.

Communications Research Centre, Ottawa

Gopher address: debra.dgbt.doc.ca

Although not an "official" Government of Canada gopher, the Communications Research Centre provides valuable information. Included are such items as the Open Government Pilot Project, including textual and visual information on the House of Commons, Senate, Supreme Court and more. Also included are Industry Canada resources, Supreme Court members and rulings, listings of MP's from each party and province, the 1994 Federal Budget, and access to other Government of Canada gophers.

National Library of Canada Gopher

Gopher address: gopher.nlc-bnc.ca

The National Library of Canada gopher provides access to virtually every library across Canada. It provides a link to Canadian Government information and documents such as the Constitution Act 1867, NAFTA, and the 1994 federal throne speech and budget. As well, there are links to the Meech Lake Accord and Charlottetown Constitutional Agreement. Furthermore, access to Canadian Internet resources is provided, including a range of gophers, Free-Nets, and tools to find people on the Internet. Finally, there is an "Internet and the World" menu-option which allows the user to access Internet resources worldwide.

Natural Resources Gopher

Gopher address: gopher.emr.ca

This Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) federal government department gopher offers a variety of information. Coverage of natural resources is extensive, including information on the Canadian Forest Service (menu-item #2), energy sector, mining sector, statutes administered by NRCan, and access to the NRCan headquarters library, to name only a few. NRCan also offers gophers from around the world, giving the user the ability to explore the virtual globe.

Statistics Canada

Gopher address: talon.statcan.ca

The Statistics Canada gopher provides information on "e-stat" (i.e. electronic statistics), and provides access to CANSIM (Canadian Socio-Economic Information Management System), which contains a wide-variety of socio-economic statistical data. Service is offered in either French or English.

Government of B.C. - Information Providers

Gopher address: cln.etc.bc.ca

The focus of information found here relates to the Community Learning Network (CLN) project, a pilot project of the Education Technology Centre and the Ministry of Education. Examples of information include an electronic government directory, press releases, statistics, documents and ministry objectives covering almost every ministry of the B.C. government. As well, gateways are provided to other gopher servers, Free-Nets, library resources, and news.

Government of Ontario Ministries

Gopher address: govonca.gov.on.ca

This relatively new gopher contains only three ministries at the present time, they are: Agriculture and Food, Economic Development and Trade, and Environment and Energy. Decisions and press releases are available, as well as connections to other agricultural and environmental gophers, and a white pages for Canadian organizations.

Ontario Ministry of Education and Training

Gopher address: gopher.mcu.gov.on.ca

This gopher is designed to provide information about the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. For example, it includes vast amounts of information regarding education and research, gophers by subject area, access to SchoolNet, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and information about Ontario universities and colleges.

Internet Wiretap

Gopher address: wiretap.spies.com

Although not Canadian in focus, the Internet Wiretap contains a variety of useful government and trade documents. For example, the text of NAFTA, the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, various United Nations Resolutions and Clinton Press Releases are available, along with a plethora of other U.S. and world information.

E-Mail and Two Way Communication

It would seem logical to expect that legislators at all levels would be embracing information technology offered by the Internet.

> *As an intern with the British Columbia Legislature, I fully expected parliamentarians, their support and research staff, and officers of the House to have electronic communication lines open to their counterparts in other provinces and at the federal level.*

In an attempt to discover which legislatures were actively connected to the Internet, I contacted various computer systems administrators across the country. I discovered that parliamentarians are not currently utilizing electronic communication to any great extent, though some jurisdictions are planning implementation in the near future.

A Systems Analyst for the Alberta legislative assembly, stated that, "there are no direct internet connections for members of the Assembly as of yet, though it is a possibility for the future." Most other provinces are in a similar position, without internet connections for parliamentarians to communicate electronically, but open to possibilities for future development. The Director of Legislative Information Systems for the Ontario legislature, indicated that, "although members do not currently have internet access, we are in the early stages of developing

connections." In Saskatchewan the Director of Personnel, Administrative Services noted, "there is no e-mail communication," and went on to say that, "there are no plans for implementation in the near future." New Brunswick is attempting to take the lead among provinces by getting members on-line, starting with the Premier Frank Mckenna (premier@gov.nb.ca). However, not all members of that House are currently communicating electronically.

At the federal level a number of projects and studies are underway but as one MP, Reg Alcock, stated, "At the present time, the "hill" does not have a node [on the Internet]. There is a proposal to establish one and I expect that we will be hooked up soon. I don't think it will change much in the near future. At the present time, as far as I can discern, I am the only member who makes use of the Internet; I have a lot of constituents on the Internet as I represent a university in my riding."

It is clear that legislators are not making much use of the Internet. If computer network communication is indeed part of the "new economy," it is imperative that legislatures adopt this new technology to be able to function more efficiently and effectively in this new information era. Further, as political issues in the areas of trade, technology and communication become increasingly complex, the necessity of rapid communication lines between policy makers across the country becomes essential. Finally, as growing numbers of Canadians begin to access and utilize electronic communication, they will increasingly demand electronic interaction with their representatives.

The importance of legislative institutions adopting computer communication technology is indisputable. However, there are several factors which will have to be overcome before the use of information technology among parliamentarians becomes widespread. For instance, it is always difficult to change established methods of communication. Tools such as the telephone, fax machine and post-office mail are comfortable and familiar. In contrast, electronic mail and protocols are unfamiliar and thus intimidating. It is likely that a fear of new technologies creates hurdles to their implementation. Parliamentarians must take the initiative in directing the implementation of computer information technology; they must communicate their needs to the appropriate computer systems personnel.❖