
Using the Internet: An E-Mail Interview with 5 Legislators

As more and more legislators begin to access the Internet either through their own assembly or from commercial providers it becomes easier to communicate with the public or with fellow legislators. The following interviews were conducted completely over the Internet between April 1 and May 1, 1995. All members were sent the same questions and their answers were collated with only slight editorial changes to avoid repetition and duplication. This interview focuses on the use of the technology itself but future ones might relate to any issue of public policy. David Schreck is the MLA for North Vancouver-Lonsdale in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly. Lynn Verge is the MHA for Humber East in the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly. Brent Taylor is the MLA for Southwest Miramichi in the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly. Reg Alcock is the federal Member of Parliament for Winnipeg South. Werner Schmidt is the federal Member of Parliament for Okanagan Centre.



Could you give us a bit of personal background, including your experience with computers and when you began using the Internet?

Brent Taylor: I began using computers in my work as a researcher and speechwriter in late 1989. After finally acquiring a decent computer system for my home in 1992, I began to use a 2400 baud modem to log into the government's communications and press release service to download information. I signed onto the Internet in March of 1994. Initially I considered it a personal/recreational service, which I still do on my personal account. A few months ago I received approval from the budget office to establish

my own office slip account with the local dial-up provider.

David Schreck: In 1964 I was into ham radio. When I went to college I let that hobby drop, but all economics' majors were required to do a non-credit course in fortran. I mistook the full course work for the next day's assignment and never looked back. It has been my hobby ever since, going back to bulletin boards which combine information technology and the old ham radio interests through CompuServe about 8 years ago. I have been active on the Internet since it became generally available through commercial servers 3 or 4 years ago.

I am 48 years old. I have a Ph.D in economics from the University of British Columbia. I managed CU&C

Health Services Society, the largest dental carrier in BC from 1979-1988 and was CEO of the Vancouver Resources Board from 1975-77. I did economic consulting from 1988-91. I am currently on the Board of BC Hydro, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Investment, on Public Accounts and assorted other committees both legislative and internal. I am a Vice-President of the BC New Democrats.

Reg Alcock: My education consists of a BA in communications from Simon Fraser University and a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard. Most of my work has been in Social Services until the mid '80s when I started a small company.

As far as computers go, I am entirely self taught. I began on an old Radio Shack trs80 in the early 1980s which I used to track cases in an institution which I ran.

I was introduced to the Internet in 1986, when I taught at the University of Manitoba for one year.

Werner Schmidt: I am a graduate in Education and Educational Administration from the University of Alberta. I was a teacher, principal and superintendent of schools in the Edmonton area. Later I was Director of Development at Okanagan College in Kelowna. I was a founding member and served on the first executive council of the Reform Party before being elected to the House of Commons in 1993.

I began using computers only quite recently. They are useful in allowing me to better organize my work in terms of notes, speeches, memoranda etc. Rather than writing notes and having them typed by my staff, I can do the typing myself and free up their time for more productive work. I can work as I travel which makes my flying time more productive. That is fairly significant when one's riding is in British Columbia.

Our office began using the Internet when I was asked if we would be willing to participate in the Internet pilot project. Because of the Internet's ever-expanding nature, more and more Canadians are using it. I felt it would be a useful tool for our office to have in providing more ways for Canadians to contact us. In addition, it is proving to be a valuable research tool for my staff in their daily work.

Lynn Verge: I was born and raised in Corner Brook and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with a joint major in Economics and political science from Memorial University in 1970 and graduated

from Dalhousie University with a Bachelor of Laws degree in 1973.

After law school, I practised law in Corner Brook until my election to the House of Assembly in 1979. I was Minister of Education from 1979 to 1985 and Minister of Justice and Attorney General from 1985 to 1989.

For the past five years, as an Opposition Member, I served as critic responsible for justice, the constitution, the status of women, and culture. I was elected leader of the provincial Progressive Conservative Party in April 1995.



Describe your present computer hardware and software?

Reg Alcock: I have a six terminal network in my Winnipeg office, a three terminal network in Ottawa and a stand-a-lone machine at home. All are DOS based 486s. They range in speed from a single 25 to several 66s. In addition, I am currently purchasing a 486 notebook and three docking stations one for each location. I also have five 286 desktop machines and two 286 notebooks which I use on a phone network. Most of the machines have 8 megs of RAM, a few have 16.

I have 5 modems - all of them 14.4s. The server has a gigabyte. My notebook will have 810megs, and the terminals have 280 - 350 each. The home machine has one half gig. All are DOS machines, although the notebook has OS2.

I work in my Winnipeg office, at home and in my Ottawa office.

For word-processing I use MSWord. All machines have the Microsoft office installed. In my legislative work I use, Excel, Access, Powerpoint, Schedule, Mail, Netscape, Eudora e-Mail, Pubnet

(House of Commons Hansard), and Winfax.

Brent Taylor: I use a PC 486 computer running under DOS and Windows. It has 8 megs of memory and a 240 meg hard disk. It is a stand alone computer, not connected to a network. Most of my work is done using Wordperfect for Windows.

David Schreck: I use three computers — a 486 at home, a 386 lap top in Victoria and a 386 in my constituency office. None of them are on a network. My lap top has 1 meg of memory while the other two both have 8 megs. The lap top has 80 meg hard drive, my constituency office has 100 and at home I have 420 meg of disk space. All three computers have 14,400 baud modems. For word processing I use Word for Windows 6.0 both at home and at my constituency office. I use Word for DOS on the lap top. In the course of my work I also have occasion to use CorelDraw, Dbase and MS Publisher.

Lynn Verge: I have an HP Vectra 486/66. It has 12 meg of memory and a 320 meg hard drive. It is on a network and I use Wordperfect for Windows.

Werner Schmidt: I personally use a 486 SX33 notebook with 8 mb ram and a 200mb hard drive I use Windows with MS Word 6.0. My Hill office staff uses two 486s, one a DX33 and one a SX25. Both have 8mb of ram. The DX has a 540mb hard drive and the SX has a 340mb hard drive. The DX currently uses Windows for Workgroups but will be going to Windows NT soon when my local office network is set up. The SX also uses Windows for Workgroups. When my local network is installed, my DX will be going to 16mb of ram. Both machines have the full MS Office suite installed. The DX is hooked into the Hill-wide network and has

access to Pubnet, the on-line version of Hansard, as well as the Internet.

My constituency office has a 286 laptop and a 386 desktop. The 386 is using Windows and MS Office. The laptop is using Wordperfect 5.1. The constituency office will be hooked up with the Hill via modem shortly.



How do you access the Internet?

Brent Taylor: I access the Internet through New Brunswick-Telephone's NBNET service. This is a dialup service and I use a US Robotics 14,400 modem. I can access the Internet from both my legislative office and from home.

David Schreck: My legislative assistant has access to Internet through the legislature but all my use is done through my own personal accounts and paid for by me personally. I subscribe to four commercial services: CompuServe, Cyberstore, Wimsey Information Services and Mindlink. Each of them offers access to slightly different newsgroups.

Lynn Verge: I access the Internet through a commercial provider. I use ProComm Plus for Windows 2.0 and a 14,400 modem. I work from both home and my office.

Reg Alcock: Internet is provided and supported by the House of Commons. I also have an Internet account provided by the University in my area.

Werner Schmidt: Access to Internet is provided by the House of Commons.



Do you have a home page. If so what kind of information do you put on it.

David Schreck: I do not have a home page on the Internet but my party has just put one up. It contains

information about such things as the BC Convention 1995; information on the Abbotsford provincial by-election, a newsletter, *The New Democrat*.

The site also contains links to other New Democratic Parties such as Manitoba and the federal NDP.

The BC Legislature also has a home page. It contains information since the start of the present session on March 22, 1995. It includes the Speech from the Throne, the 1995 Budget, a message from the Speaker, a list of all members of the Assembly, Bills, Votes and Proceedings, Orders of the Day, Notices of Committee meetings, even an electronic version of Hansard since March 22.

Lynn Verge: My home page address was created by Chris Crocker, a political science major at Memorial University and who was a member of the Verge campaign technical support team. This was prepared as part of my Lynn Verge Leadership Campaign for the Progressive Conservative Leadership Convention held on April 30, 1995. The home page includes my resume, campaign literature and newsletters.

Reg Alcock: Yes, I have a home page. It contains information on current issues such as my biography, my voting record, current issue surveys. You can also access interesting Canadian information through my home page, including Canadiana, Open Government, and the Department of Justice.

Werner Schmidt: Not as yet, but the Reform Party has one where biographical information can be obtained on Reform MPs. The party is providing space to its constituency associations for their own home pages and there may be an opportunity for MPs to take

advantage of this as there are no plans afoot at the House of Commons to provide home page space for MPs, however the House has its own home page.

Brent Taylor: I mainly use the Internet for e-mail correspondence and not as a bulletin board for information. I am also on a listserver which brings me a number of "read and trash" messages.



Do you answer e-mail yourself or is this done by someone in your office.

Brent Taylor: I check and answer all e-mail myself which at the moment probably takes no more than an hour a week.

David Schreck: I answer all e-mail myself. I generally spend between 15 and 30 minutes on e-mail correspondence per day and perhaps another hour or so on usenet.bc.general.

Lynn Verge: At the moment I have someone who answers all e-mail.

Reg Alcock: Currently, I read all my own e-mail. The day is fast approaching where the volume will grow to the point where staff will have to take over.

Werner Schmidt: My staff handles most of the inquiries, however, if it is from a constituent they will pass it on to me in written form for my reply.



Approximately how many letters do you receive in an average day or week by e-mail. Of these how many are from other members of the legislature and how many from constituents, how many from neither?

Brent Taylor: I receive very little correspondence from fellow

legislators or from constituents. Most of it seems to be requests for information from students, journalists, researchers etc.

David Schreck: I get an average of 1 or 2 messages from other legislators each day. I have only had about a dozen of my own constituents use e-mail to me but as a result of my presence on bc.general newsgroup. I tend to get e-mail from all over the province.

Lynn Verge: We receive an average of about 10 letters a day and it takes about one hour to answer them. So far, I have not received any correspondence from other MHAs or Members from other assemblies. All correspondence has come from constituents.

Reg Alcock: My home page receives 50 to 60 e-mail messages per day. I spend 30 to 45 minutes at the start of each day reading and replying to the e-mail.

The majority of e-mail comes from constituents (I have a large university in my area, so many of my constituents are familiar with and have access to the net).

Werner Schmidt: Most of the mail flowing into the office is not from constituents. I get less than 3 per week from constituents, but I have not been on the Internet for long, so we have to wait and see. A lot of other e-mail comes from other sources and is usually given a quick response by members of my staff.



Are you satisfied with the way your Legislature is making use of the potential of the Internet?

Brent Taylor: I have been advocating a much more involved Legislature but have really seen nothing yet. New Brunswick is supposed to be a leader in the field of information technologies and data transmission, but it certainly

does not show in the Legislature. Order papers, journals, Hansard, status of bills reports - all should be available now, but there is no hint of these being available on-line any time soon. Very few Members currently sitting have any interest in even finding out more about the Internet.

I have been very impressed with the recent development of the Thomas system in the United States, and am pleased to report that our Legislative Assembly has just gone onto the government's Web Page. Much more work has to be done, but it is a start.

David Schreck: I am delighted with our new home page. I have not found anything better anywhere. I have complemented all those involved in three speeches in the Legislature. I am lobbying to add on-line access without charge to the consolidated statutes of British Columbia.

Lynn Verge: To date, there is no official use of the Internet by the Legislature. The recent start-up of an Infonet (Freenet) here in St. John's should make the general public more involved with the Internet. This should provide some motivation for the Legislature to get more involved.

Reg Alcock: The House of Commons is only beginning its use of the Internet - so it is a bit early to judge.

Werner Schmidt: More could be done with Internet, but the in-house service provider is limiting our ability to be more active, i.e. we can't put up our own Web page.



How would you respond to critics who cite the potential dangers with this technology including false and mischievous messages or posting

information that cannot be distributed by other means?

Brent Taylor: I see a lot of false and mischievous information in our daily newspapers, House speeches, television news, and other sources regularly. The Internet cannot guarantee truth any more than can some other medium.

As for "banned" information, I feel that free speech and freedom to communicate outweigh the dangers to society, if there are any. I have grave concerns about one area, the ability to exchange, create, disseminate or otherwise promote criminally obscene or perverse material.

Maybe these issues could be solved by preventing anonymous posting or mailing. Perhaps some of these "anon" services like the one at PENET should be shut down, forcing people to at least have valid e-mail addressed issued by their provider.

David Schreck: It is no worse than dealing with the news media! There is a dark side of the web but it is like the dark side of life. It is a constant struggle to set and enforce community norms. In the meantime, a technology that will have a greater impact than the invention of the printing press should not have its growth retarded because of a few perverts.

Lynn Verge: As with any service, responsibility rests with both the provider of the information and the consumer. There are currently provisions in various Canadian statutes meant to deal with these issues. Of course, practical problems lie with the enforcement of the existing laws when dealing with a technology that crosses international boundaries, that can reach into almost any home, and that can be accessed by anyone who knows how to find it.

Reg Alcock: I simply do not accept that access to information is a danger. There is a need for better co-ordination of international law in areas of hate literature and violence. However, I do not feel that personal information is at much risk. If the bank can keep my money safe from electronic theft then I suspect that we can find ways to ensure privacy.

Werner Schmidt: Strategies have emerged on the Internet itself to adapt to mischief but one must always be careful. Fraud is a crime and can be prosecuted. Telephone fraud exists but we have learned to deal with it, so we can deal with fraud in the Internet as well. Generators of illegal material, if in Canada, can be prosecuted. Otherwise, international agreements must be reached.

One must always assume, for now at least, that anything put on the Internet, even private e-mail, might be read by someone else and hence, is public.

Can you give me some names of the newsgroups to which you

subscribe and which you find useful in your work?

Brent Taylor: I look at (lurk but rarely post). Among those I read are:

- can.general
- can.politics
- can.atlantic.general

Others involving party politics in the United States, Congress.

David Schreck: Currently I am the only MLA in BC who goes onto usenet.bc.general identified as an MLA (government no less) and is willing to debate anyone on anything. That also results in some e-mail on various private matters similar to doing other constituency work. In addition to bc.general I follow the newsgroups dealing with telecommunications technology. I belong to about twenty other groups including:

- Usenet.van.general (Discussion of Vancouver Regional Issues)
- Local.Announce.Important (Births, Deaths, Marriages, etc)
- NewsBytes.Government (Government purchases and programs).

Lynn Verge: Some of the newsgroups which I find useful include:

- nf.general and sj.general (these are groups which contain postings

from around the province and the capital city St. John's)

- stemnet.general (This is the central newsgroup in the network established to link teachers in this province. At least one teacher in nearly every school in the province has access to this network. They exchange ideas regarding the school system and about other topics related to education).
- can.politics (By monitoring this newsgroup, people can get a sense of how people in different parts of the country feel about a given topic. It is especially useful for a Newfoundland politician to gauge public opinion elsewhere in Canada about issues affecting Newfoundland, such as foreign overfishing off our coast.)

Reg Alcock: I am a member of several networks for example:

- Harvard University strategic computing group
- Carleton University, public policy group
- Bosnet - a group monitoring events in the former Yugoslavia.

I also follow a few of the newsgroups related to Canadian politics.

Werner Schmidt: I sometimes access the following:

- bc.general
- bc.politics
- can.general
- can.politics

Some Home Pages of Interest to Legislators

House of Commons:

Quebec National Assembly:

British Columbia Legislature:

Reform Party of Canada:

British Columbia NDP Party:

Reg Alcock, MP:

Lynn Verge, MHA:

US House of Representatives:

Library of Congress:

Congressional Documents:

Australia Parliament:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/English/>

http://www.gouv.qc.ca/anglais/assnat/an_intro.html/

<http://bbs.qp.gov.bc.ca/legis/legis.htm>

<http://www.reform.ca/>

<http://www.bc.ndp.ca/>

<http://www.mbnet.mb.ca/wpgsth/>

<http://www.compusult.nf.ca/~verge>

<http://www.house.gov/>

<http://www.loc.gov/>

<http://thomas.loc.gov/>

<http://www.aph.gov.au/>