Parliament and the Internet: The Present and the Future

by Michael K. Barbour

Every member of the Senate and the House of Commons along with their staff have access to e-mail, the World-Wide Web and Usenet newsgroups. However, just getting connected to the internet does not ensure that this communications tool is used to the fullest extent. This article looks at what Parliamentarians are doing and what they could do in the future.

In the early 1990s the Internet was just a mysterious entity that did not figure prominently in the work of most legislators. Today all federal and most provincial legislators have been connected to the Internet in one form or another yet the question still arises as to what extent this new technology is being used in the offices of Canadian legislators. To try and answer this question a survey consisting of eight questions was sent by e-mail to all 301 Members of the House of Commons in early 1999.

The questions were as follows:

- Do you check/read your e-mail on a regular basis?
- Do you reply to any e-mail that warrants a response?
- Do you maintain an e-mail database for regular or mass correspondence?
- Do you monitor Usenet newsgroups?
- Do you post to Usenet newsgroups?
- Do you have a World-Wide Web site?
- How often is this site update?
- What sort of material is available on your World-Wide Web site?

The response rate, 32 out of 301, is in line with traditional mail surveys although one might have hoped for a larger response given the ease of answering questions by e-mail. Nevertheless based on these responses it is possible to make some general observations about how Parliamentarians are using e-mail, the World Wide Web and Usenet newsgroups.

Of the 32 MPs who replied to the survey, only 10 of them were using e-mail databases. Most political offices have traditional, mailing databases which can be merged with form letters or used to run off labels to send out copies of the MP's or Senator's last speech. This kind of direct mail is popular both as a fundraising and advertising tool. It would seem logical to take this to the next step and create an e-mail database that could be used to contact special interest groups, the business community, supporters and donators.

This could be done quite simply by keeping a record of the people that e-mail a member's office and watching for e-mail addresses printed on the business cards something that is becoming a more common practice. A survey could be included in a householder, asking constituents questions about their level of Internet access and including a space for them to write their e-mail address. These are all ways to start to collect e-mail addresses to add to an e-mail database.

Imagine being able to contact these groups and individuals on a regular basis, occupying little in the way of staff time and at no cost to the taxpayer. The beauty about e-mail is that a two screen e-mail is less than half a page of text. This half page could contain anything; excerpts of speeches, press releases, short notes about a particular issue or just the activities of the MP or Senator

Thirteen MPs who replied to the survey had World-Wide Web pages. This is one area where some members are being quite creative. They used this medium to post

Michael Barbour is a former parliamentary staffer. He worked for retired Senator Jack Marshall, Senators Dan Hays and Jerry Grafstein and former MP Anna Terrana. He is presently a graduate student in Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland and a Social Studies teacher at Discovery Collegiate in Bonavista.

biographical information, parliamentary responsibilities, riding achievements, feedback, press releases, speeches, political party and other links, and householders, FAQ's (or Frequently Asked Questions), and articles for local papers. At least one member, Herb Dhaliwal, has created a World-Wide Web site with his own domain name (*www.herbdhaliwal.com*). Members of the House of Commons who have homepages, registered with the Canadian Yahoo include Hedy Fry, Jay Hill, John Godfrey, Jim Jones, Derek Lee, Peter Milliken, John O'Reilley, Carmen Provenazano, Julian Reed, and Alex Shepherd." A number of Senators including Dan Hays, Colin Kenny and Sharon Carstairs have established home pages linked to the Parliamentary Internet.

Some MPs create a homepage shortly before the election, so that it can be used as an election tool. In many cases, however, it is the political party that has established information about each of their MPs. It would appear less than 10% of parliamentarians are using the World Wide Web as an important part of their communication strategy.

Perhaps the part of the Internet most under utilised is Usenet newsgroups. A newsgroup is akin to an electronic message board. They are arranged around particular thematic topics or geographic areas. Anyone with access to the Internet can simply post a new message on a topic of his or her choice or respond to a message posted by someone else. Since 1995 I have personally seen only two parliamentarians ever post messages to a Usenet newsgroup. Replies to the survey support this observation. Out of the 32 respondents, only 4 MPs stated that they monitor Usenet newsgroups and only 3 of those stated that they had ever posted a message to a newsgroup.

To what newsgroups should a message be posted? Any really, although it is not considered good etiquette to post messages that are off-topic to a particular newsgroup. For example, an MP from British Columbia might consider posting messages to *bc.general* or *bc.politics*. If they happened to be from Vancouver, they might consider including *vancouver.general* as well. An Alberta Senator interested in agriculture might consider posting a message to *ab.gov.agriculture.barley*. Or an MP interested in gun control could post a message to *can.talk.guns*. At the very least, most provinces have a *[province].general* and a *[province].politics* newsgroup and there are *can.general* and *can.politics* newsgroups that cover the entire country. There are tens of thousands of other newsgroups available to choose from.

Problems Associated with Using the Internet

One of the main reasons parliamentarians have not embraced the Internet as a communications method of the future is because of the demographics of Internet users. It is estimated that one quarter of Canadians have access to the Internet at home, work or school. However, the vast majority of these Internet users are still university students. As a population, this group is declining in political participation and is transient by nature. Many individuals within this group only have access to the Internet while at their university campus and not in their part-time university accommodations or in their permanent residence. Experience has also shown that another large segment of Internet users are those who already have strong political opinions. This group, tends to use e-mail to ask extremely technical questions that are time consuming answer.

Another reason for parliamentarians limited use of the Internet is the demographics of their individual ridings. Many ridings, particularly poorer or rural ridings do not have the level of Internet use that many of the more affluent or urban areas do. A fine example of this is the riding of Vancouver East. During her time as a Member of Parliament and during her re-election campaign, Anna Terrana spent much time and resources on ensuring that she had a state of the art World-Wide Web site and timely, detailed response to e-mail inquiries. However, the riding of Vancouver East covers some of the poorest areas in all of Canada. After the election, her former Executive Assistant and Campaign Manager observed that many constituents and voters would question why Ms. Terrana focused so much on the Internet when very few residents of Vancouver East even owned computers.

A final reason why the Internet is not being used to full potential is a lack of technological knowledge on the part of parliamentarians and their staff. Internet expertise has yet to become a requirement when hiring political staff on Parliament Hill. Those who do now possess the technical "know how" to use the Internet in the ways outlined earlier also have a large misconception about how difficult this task will be. It has become a common misconception among non-Internet users that the Internet is vast, complex and difficult to understand. However, this myth is being broken down and the sooner people realise how easy many of these Internet initiatives can be, the sooner parliamentarians will begin to take full advantage of all the Internet has to offer.

Some International Comparisons

The first comparison should be with other parliamentary systems, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and

New Zealand. In the United Kingdom not one parliamentarian is connected to the Internet through their parliamentary connection (*www.parliament.uk*). This means that there are no individual e-mail addresses or world-wide web homepages for parliamentarians. The Parliament in the United Kingdom does have one general e-mail address and does have a world-wide web site for the institution. Finally, in a two month survey of two politically-oriented Usenet newsgroups in the United Kingdom (*uk.politics.elections* and *uk.politics.parliament*), there was no evidence of any Parliament initiated messages.

In New Zealand there is no individual access to e-mail or world-wide web homepages for parliamentarians on the parliamentary server (*mx.parliament.govt.nz*). There is one general e-mail address for Ministers of the Cabinet (*announce@ministers.govt.nz*). The Government uses this account to post messages to the *nz.politics* Usenet newsgroup. Over a three month period, the Government posted an average of five to eight ministerial announcements per week. In addition to the ministerial announcement, one of the parliamentary caucuses also posts messages to the *nz.politics* newsgroup. The ACT political party's parliamentary office (*act@parliament.govt.nz*), which has eight out of one hundred and twenty seats (they are the fifth out of six parties represented in Parliament), has regularly posted press releases and speeches to the newsgroup.

Their close neighbours in Australian are ahead of their Pacific colleagues, although they are still not to the point that Parliamentarians have reached in Canada. In Australia, MPs and Senators do have access to individual e-mail addresses (on the *aph.gov.au* domain), but not to individual world-wide web pages. While Australian parliamentarians have access to e-mail accounts, they also do not use them to post messages to Usenet newsgroups. In February of this year, the only political organisation to post any messages to the *aus.politics* Usenet newsgroup was the Australian Democratic political party (*webmaster@democrats.org.au*), which posted three press releases.

In the United States, every single member of the House of Representatives and every single Senator has access to individual e-mail addresses and individual world-wide web homepages (*www.house.gov* or *www.senate.gov*). In addition, the President, Vice-President and the First Lady all have individual e-mail addresses and the White House has its own world-wide web site (*www.whitehouse.gov*). However, even with this blanket access to the Internet, members of the House of Representatives and Senators still do not appear to post messages to Usenet newsgroups. Even during presidential elections, neither the Democratic or Republican Campaign Committees used newsgroups much during the campaign (although

the Republican National Committee has begun posting since the beginning of 1998). The White House is the only government organisation that has made extensive and regular use of Usenet newsgroups. The White House posted all press releases and all speaking notes to *alt.politics.elections*, along with many other newsgroups, leading up to the Presidential election in 1996.

When considered against the United States, Canadian parliamentarians are not all that far behind in their Internet usage. Both groups of legislators have full access to e-mail accounts and both groups have access to Usenet newsgroups (although neither body uses them). The only real difference between the two groups is that in the United States the vast majority of legislators have personal world-wide web homepages, while in Canada only a select few have them.

In the United States as well as Australia and New Zealand, political parties have been using Usenet newsgroups whereas their legislative representatives fail to do so. This trend has not been lost on Canadian political parties which are also making use of the Internet and in some cases, making a more effective use of the Internet than parliamentarians.

The Canadian parties represented in Parliament were questioned about their Internet use, via e-mail and three of them responded (the Liberal Party, Reform Party and New Democratic Party). In addition to web and e-mail presence, the parties that responded, also monitor Usenet newsgroups although none actually post messages to Usenet newsgroups.

With the exception of the PC Party, which did have an e-mail listserver in 1995-96, none of the political parties have listservers (although they do make mention of lists that are ideologically similar). The Reform Party (which was the first party to have an Internet presence) is the only party that allows their Parliamentarians to have e-mail accounts and world-wide web sites on their party's domain (*reform.ca*).

Conclusion

Over the past three years, we have seen access to and use of the Internet increase dramatically by parliamentarians. However, there are still many areas that can be expanded and improved upon. New initiatives do not require vast commitments of personal or resources. Many can be done taking only minutes out of someone's day. However, valid reasons exist as to why parliamentarians have not yet embraced Internet usage to its fullest extent.