
The National Assembly of Québec in the Digital Era

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Since the launch of its website in 1995, the National Assembly of Québec has been a leader in using online technology to reach out to citizens. In this article, the authors describe efforts to launch and accept online petitions, online comments and citizen consultation of proposed legislation, and the more recent growth of social media networking. They conclude by noting the special attention paid towards responsible social media use and how this new technology can bring about effective communication between the people and their government.

To better inform citizens and increase their participation in the workings of their Parliament, the National Assembly of Québec launched its website in 1995. In 2010, the site was overhauled to enable Quebecers to participate more directly in the democratic process; in 2012 we went one step further when we chose to be present on social media. For years now, the National Assembly's use of technology has facilitated both parliamentary business and citizen involvement through online petitions, comments and consultations, not to mention our official Facebook page and Twitter account.

Online Petitions Popular with Citizens

Since 2009, citizens have been able to express their views by signing petitions on the National Assembly website. Anyone seeking redress for a grievance can start an online petition, which can then be signed by others sharing the same concern and, ultimately, be tabled in the House by a Member. To be valid, however, an electronic petition must have been launched and signed on our website, which posts the number of people having signed in real time, but discloses no other information about them.

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In 2013-2014, 100 e-petitions bearing more than 360,000 signatures were presented. By contrast, the 135 or so petitions presented that same year in paper form contained only about 180,350 signatures (See Table 1).

Online Comments Facilitate Parliamentary Business

The National Assembly website also allows users to comment online on any bill or subject being studied in a parliamentary committee, even if the committee's mandate is not being submitted for public consultation. They simply choose the mandate or bill that interests them and complete a form online. The Members can read these comments on the Clerks' site, a virtual library of documents reserved for Members' use. This rapid access allows the Members to take citizens' concerns into better account. In 2013-2014 alone, 1,395 comments were received on 91 subjects or mandates.

Online Consultations Foster Citizen Participation

Online consultations also reflect our use of technology to increase public participation and make it easier for Quebecers to express their concerns. As a complement to the more traditional forms of consultation, e-consultation allows people to give their opinions on a subject being studied by completing an online questionnaire. The responses are then forwarded to committee members to fuel their deliberations.

Our first online consultation was held in summer 2000 and many others followed. This consultation method was formally incorporated into the Standing Orders in the parliamentary reform of 2009. The online consultation by the Select Committee on Dying with Dignity prompted more public participation than any

other, with 6,779 people completing the questionnaire on the National Assembly website (*See Table 2*).

Online Consultations Since 2009

By giving Members access to a great many responses to specific questions, online consultations enable them to “read” public opinion on certain issues. For their part, citizens are able to participate in mandates and express their viewpoints without having to travel or submit a brief.

means of communication. Besides confirming the usefulness of social media, the projects showed us how these platforms could be integrated into our communication strategies. The project teams were able to familiarize themselves with these new tools while honing their reflex to exercise caution. The projects highlighted the importance of implementing strict rules to protect the National Assembly on social media and prevent inappropriate behaviour by both Internet users and employees.

Table 1. Petitions

Fiscal year	No. of petitions tabled		No. of petitioners	
	Paper	Electronic	Paper	Electronic
2008-2009*	94	0	269,182	0
2009-2010	158	9	234,039	70,602
2010-2011	166	42	341,001	472,010
2011-2012	121	67	185,797	217,030
2012-2013*	109	59	191,502	197,816
2013-2014	135	100	180,351	360,121

*General election year

From Website to Social Media

In addition to supporting parliamentary business and citizen participation, the National Assembly website helps us disseminate information to specific groups and forge closer ties with them. Wishing to go further still, in 2009, a few months before launching our new website, we began to seriously consider using social media to reach out to Internet users and rouse their interest in the parliamentary and institutional information available on our website. Our website and social media are complementary-but-different means of providing the public with access to information. While information transmitted via social media sometimes tends towards the pedagogical and promotional, our website provides factual information on parliamentary and institutional news.

Although some Members were already active social media users, the Assembly decided to conduct three pilot projects, one on Facebook and two on Twitter, before opting for these new

Facebook: Official and Specialized Channels

In November 2012, the National Assembly launched its official Facebook page to cover institutional and parliamentary news and give citizens the sense that their Parliament is accessible to them. We also wanted to create a “buzz” around the activities of Parliament and demystify the Members’ work. With Facebook, we can send messages to Internet users wherever they are. The website must be consulted, making it more static.

Our Facebook page contains information on parliamentary proceedings, institutional activities, events for the general public (exhibitions, conferences, brunches, etc.) and the National Assembly itself (schedules, services, historical information, etc.). We also use it to promote our website (news, useful sections, helpful hints, etc.), provide links to specialized Facebook pages and promote the Assembly’s information package in the social media.

Our official Facebook page (www.facebook.com/AssnatQc) is intended for the general public, the media,

the Members and our political and administrative staff. By late September 2014, it had more than 4,000 “likes”.

Three related Facebook pages target more specific National Assembly audiences:

- Programme de stages – Fondation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant (www.facebook.com/FJCBstages) promotes the Assembly’s internship program and is for undergraduate and graduate students as well as former and current scholarship winners and parliamentary interns.
- Archives et histoire de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec (www.facebook.com/ArchivesHistoireAssnatQc) promotes the Assembly’s historical, archival and museum-related activities and targets history buffs, current and former Members and political and administrative staff.
- Espace jeunesse de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec (www.facebook.com/EspaceJeunesseAssnatQc), an educational space and source of information for young people and teachers, provides historical information related to Québec’s education programs and information for school groups. It is intended for young people and those working with them.

Twitter: Official and Specialized Accounts

Shortly after our Facebook page went online, the National Assembly opened a Twitter account targeting

essentially the same user groups and providing similar information to our Facebook page, but more concisely and directly. Promoting the Assembly’s information package in the social media, it provides links to our other Twitter accounts:

@BiblioAssnat (<https://twitter.com/BiblioAssnat>), which promotes our Library and the activities held there (new books, collections, conferences, etc.), is for members of the Press Gallery, Members of the National Assembly and those with a keen interest in history, politics and law.

@CommParlQc (<https://twitter.com/CommParlQc>), which keeps citizens informed of parliamentary committee work in real time, is intended for Members of the National Assembly, our political and administrative staff and those interested in parliamentary proceedings.

Twitter is an excellent tool for announcing publications, activities and opportunities for direct public participation. A natural complement to Facebook, it directs users toward dialogue platforms, encourages them to gain knowledge of, and become involved in, their Parliament and brings Parliament and the people closer together. By late September 2014, more than 2,900 Internet users were regularly reading our official Tweets (<https://twitter.com/AssnatQc>).

Table 2. Online Consultation

Mandates	No. of questionnaires received
General consultations on the draft bill entitled <i>An Act to amend the Civil Code and other legislative provisions as regards adoption and parental authority</i>	253
Order of initiative mandate on cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) in Québec lakes and rivers	85
Select Committee on Dying with Dignity	6,779
Special consultations on the document <i>Turning Equality in Law into Equality in Fact: Toward a Second Government Action Plan for Gender Equality</i>	99
General consultations on Québec Immigration Planning for the Period 2012-2015	88
General consultations on Bill 14, <i>An Act to amend the Charter of the French language, the Charter of human rights and freedoms and other legislative provisions</i>	4,334
Order of initiative mandate on the living conditions of adults staying in residential and long-term care centres	160

The combined use of different social media platforms increases the chance that information will receive widespread attention. In late 2013, we increased our social media presence by creating our own YouTube channel. YouTube attracts 800 million individual users per month. With numbers like that, the visibility of the National Assembly and its audiovisual productions is likely to increase, facilitating Google referencing and use in social media.

Responsible Social Media Use

Shortly before launching its official Facebook page, the National Assembly issued a directive on social media use by its personnel to define the minimum requirements staff members must meet before using social media platforms in their work. The idea was to define employees' responsibilities in order to create a safe work environment that respects individual and collective rights. Given the confidentiality of a number of the Assembly's activities, another aim was to make employees aware of the consequences and risks inherent in social media use.

Based on these considerations, those wishing to subscribe to our social media accounts are encouraged to read the National Assembly's netiquette guidelines when they access our website's social media page.

Social Media Use by the Members

As an institution, the National Assembly uses social media to communicate with citizens, including young people. It is safe to say that the Members have followed suit. In mid-September 2014, social media use by our 124 Members (one seat vacant) was as follows:

Facebook: 120 Members (96.7%)

Twitter: 96 Members (77.4%)

Google+: 33 Members (26.6%)

YouTube: 38 Members (30.6%)

Increasingly Effective Communication

Over the past 20 years or so, the National Assembly has made ongoing efforts to adapt to new communication technologies in order to familiarize people—the general public and more specific groups—with our work and activities. We continue to establish closer ties with the public and find more ways of encouraging people's participation in democratic life. With such encouraging results, we have no intention of stopping now, and plan to continue maximizing our use of the Internet and social media platforms in the future.