Chapter 5
The Member for Cyberspace: E–Representation and MPs in the UK

Nigel Jackson
University of Plymouth, UK

Darren G. Lilleker
University of Bournemouth, UK

ABSTRACT
This chapter offers a framework for considering whether the Internet might be facilitating the evolution of e-representation. The chapter starts by considering the meaning of representation; it then considers what factors influence changes in the concept of representation. We argue that, potentially, the Internet may be facilitating a model of representation based not on the geographic constituency, but upon common interest. The chapter assesses the use of four Internet modalities by UK Members of Parliaments (MPs): websites, e-newsletters, weblogs, and social networking sites. We suggest that there is evidence of parallel e-representation, where MPs use the Internet to enhance their relationship with geographical constituents. We also find the basis for a separate form of e-representation based around the development of an e-constituency of those with shared policy interests. We suggest that by creating a more flexible model, e-representation may add significant nuance to the direct versus representative democracy debate.

INTRODUCTION
Since Anne Campbell became in 1994 the first UK MP set up a website, the Internet has gradually become an increasingly important channel that elected representatives use for their political communication. In fact, its unique quality for allowing open and direct access to a broad audience has seen it enhance a range of functions attached to the roles of an MP (Jackson, 2008a). A key question is whether its impact has only been to help incumbent MPs be re-elected, as most research has asked, or whether it also has a positive effect upon representation and the elector-elected relationship. The first few UK MPs to create their own website and use other Internet technologies were early adopters, who for a range of personal reasons were interested in the technology (Jackson, 2008b). However, the key motivation for the bulk of the next (and larger) tranche of MPs with an online presence was a bandwagon effect (Ward & Gibson, 1998; Ward & Lusoli, 2005).

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Whilst a small proportion of adopters might have clear communication goals for their web presence, most were merely adopting the technologies because their colleagues were, and so lacked a strategy for adoption. Certain characteristics were believed to encourage Internet use, such as marginality (Jackson, 2003), party allegiance (Vincente-Merino, 2007), party size (Jackson, 2003) and personal characteristics such as age (Ward & Lusoli, 2005); with younger MPs being more likely to be digital natives and so have a website. At the same time, the quality of MPs websites (Perrone, 2002), blogs (Auty, 2005) and social network site profiles (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Williamson, 2009a) has been criticised. Typical problems have been that MPs do not always update material regularly (Jackson, 2003), provide static electronic brochures (Painter & Wardle, 2001) and there is limited interactivity between the MP and their online visitors (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Williamson, 2009b). Overall, this implies that MPs’ use of the Internet is primarily passive and reactive, rather than supporting a proactive strategy enhancing the representative process.

Yet, despite such concerns, Internet penetration amongst MPs has continued to grow, so that by 2005 some 71% of MPs had a website (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). One explanation posited is that MPs believe that use of web technologies may help them get re-elected. Certainly, parliamentary authorities have indicated a concern that the Internet gives incumbents an unfair advantage (Gay, 2005), and Norton (2007) notes that the introduction in 2007 of an annual £10,000 ‘communications allowance’ could be used by MPs to help develop their websites, so adding to the unfair advantage incumbents received. MPs themselves also appear to believe that the Internet may have an electoral benefit, as largely those in close electoral contests seem more likely to be early adopters (Jackson, 2006). Alternatively, the impact of the Internet on MPs is more likely to be on their representative role. Whilst most research has focused on the impact of the Internet on representation at the parliamentary level (Coleman & Spiller, 2003; Norton, 2007), there is also conceptually some evidence that it can shape an MPs’ representative role. Comparing the use of new technologies in seven European countries, Hoff (2004) suggested MP’s roles were being shaped by technological developments with MPs more likely to be a prime source of local information. Jackson (2003) tested the impact of the Web on the various roles of MPs, and found that the constituency and partisan roles were enhanced. Such research raises the question of whether their findings can be viewed as an enhancement of MPs’ existing roles, or whether they herald the creation of a new model of representation.

The vast majority of research on elected representatives has focused on the use of one technology at a time. Our approach will be to use data from different research projects undertaken over a five year period which cover MP’s websites, e-newsletters, weblogs and social networking sites. This is designed to give a wider array of data to help identify whether MPs view the Internet as a vote winner, or as a tool to enhance their representative role, or whether the two are inherently entwined. This chapter aims to provide an initial test case for whether a potential model of e-representation exists. The first section will introduce the relevant literature, the second will address the methodology used, including the conceptual framework derived from the literature, then we will introduce the data and the last section will make some conclusions on MPs, the Internet and e-representation.

**BACKGROUND**

**Representation: The Relationship between MPs and Their Constituents**

There is no consensus on the meaning of political representation: but a starting point has been provided by Birch (1971) who suggests that the term ‘representation’ has three different meanings. The first concerns those who are agents of a principal
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