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Making parliamentary democracy visible

Speaking to, with, and for the public in the age of interactive technology

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It has become increasingly difficult for elite institutions to preserve an aura of impenetrable secrecy. The hypermediated twenty-first century is an age of ubiquitous visibility, leaving few institutions unexposed. This chapter explores the ways in which the new visibility has been negotiated and contested in the context of British parliamentary democracy. The chapter discusses the representation of Parliament to the public and the representation of the public voice to Parliament. Parliament has attempted to manage the terms of its own visibility, but that is a losing battle, as the data-mashers of Web 2.0 are demonstrating. In seeking to become present to their representatives, citizens have colluded with managed consultations, but these are no substitute for a trusted civic space in which the public can deliberate under its own auspices. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of digital communications for representative democracy. It outlines an argument for "direct representation": a democratic system in which citizens are spoken for. This assumes that citizens do not want to examine and vote upon every area of policy and every piece of new legislation, but they do want to be consulted and involved in the decisions that affect their own lives. Citizens are entitled to feel that their contributions will make a difference to legislators' behavior.

In a moment of political madness during the spring of 2007, the British House of Commons voted for a bill, which, had it not been subsequently blocked by the House of Lords, would have exempted Members of Parliament (MPs) from the scope of the Freedom of Information Act. In effect, the bill would have prevented requests for details of MPs' expenditure from being disclosed and would have kept secret any correspondence between MPs and public authorities regarding matters of general policy. Symbolically, the bill reinforced public distrust for an institution that has come to be popularly regarded as remote, recondite, and self-serving. A small group of MPs from all

three main parties actively opposed the passage of the bill. Norman Baker, a Liberal Democrat MP, declared that:

The argument has been won that secrecy tends to benefit only those who are corrupt, those who are incompetent or those who are careless with public money. We should not protect the people in any of those categories. The freedom of information regime that now applies to public authorities, and to this House in particular, and which we are discussing in respect of this group of amendments, has led to the beginning of a change in

culture in this country and in this House as to how we deal with information. The role of the House of Commons in how we approach these matters is central.

This minor, but highly significant battle between institutional secrecy and democratic visibility was but the latest in a long history of parliamentary resistance to the probing gaze of the public. Until 1803, scribes were prosecuted for writing reports of parliamentary proceedings; MPs regarded print as a dangerous means of stirring public excitement about issues best left to the political elite. When reporters were finally admitted into Parliament they were allowed entry on strict terms, as members of an officially regulated press lobby.

The emergence of broadcasting in the twentieth century met with similar resistance. In 1923, John Reith, the Director General of the BBC, sought permission to broadcast the King's Speech at the State Opening of Parliament, but this was refused. It was not until 1975 that the House of Commons finally agreed to an experiment in public sound broadcasting. Initial assessments of the effect of letting the public hear the proceedings of their elected representatives were negative. This was made permanent in 1978, followed by television coverage of the Lords in 1985 and the Commons in 1989. As with the press lobby before it, broadcasters were allowed into Parliament as long as they were prepared to accept strict rules of coverage—limitations that broadcasters would refuse to accept in any other institutional context.

In recent times, it has become increasingly difficult for elite institutions to preserve an aura of impenetrable secrecy. The hypermediated twenty-first century is an age of ubiquitous visibility, leaving few institutions unexposed. Political life is conducted under the gaze of an ever-

present media, driven by a 24/7 demand for revelation, making it harder than ever before for politicians to manage their own images or maintain secrets. As Thompson (2005: 42) has argued:

Whether they like it or not, political leaders today are more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past; and at the same time, they are more exposed to the risk that their actions and utterances, and the actions and utterances of others, may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish to project. Hence the visibility created by the media can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*. However much political leaders may seek to manage their visibility, they cannot completely control it. Mediated visibility can slip out of their grasp and can, on occasion, work against them.

For politicians, uncontrolled visibility constitutes a threat to their traditional backstage operations in which in times past policies could be negotiated, supporters appeased, and personal lives conducted away from public scrutiny. From the citizens' perspective, ubiquitous visibility provides a potential democratic opportunity, allowing anyone capable of setting up a website, operating a digital camera, constructing a database, or sending out a mass e-mail to engage with and represent political institutions from their own perspective. Digital information and communication technologies (ICT) have played a particularly important role here, lowering the barriers to abundant information, many-to-many communication, and media production. In pre-digital times, political institutions, ranging from parliaments to political parties to government departments, were well placed to

manage the flow of public information. This is no longer the case. As political institutions have discovered to their cost, digital communication is dangerously porous.

This chapter aims to explore the ways in which the new visibility has been negotiated and contested in the context of British parliamentary democracy. It builds upon an emerging academic literature on the relationship between digital media and the legislative process (Chen, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Coleman *et al.*, 1999; Dai and Norton, 2007; Ferber *et al.*, 2005; Filzmaier, 2004; Frissen, 2002; Hoff, 2004; Leston-Bandeira, 2007; Macintosh *et al.*, 2002; Norton, 2007; Setala and Gronlund, 2006; Shahin and Neuhold, 2007; Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Zittel, 2003). Most of this literature has had an empirical focus, examining the extent to which legislatures have adapted to the conditions of a more transparent and interactive communications environment. Important though it is for analysis to be rooted in empirical observation, there is also a need for theory to be developed about the normative requirements of representative democracy and the changes that parliaments will need to undergo if they are to escape from the currently widespread perception that British parliamentary politics are irrelevant to everyday life. A key aim of this chapter is to link empirical observations about the changing nature of parliamentary communications to questions that are traditionally considered by democratic theorists.

The British Parliament is discussed in this chapter as an example of the Westminster legislative model, as well as an indicative account of what is facing representative democracies in many countries, even where the Westminster model does not prevail. Of course, nationally-specific references do not automatically translate across political borders and conclusions drawn from this account may not apply in every

detail to other political cultures. The next two sections of this chapter consider parliamentary visibility from two perspectives: the representation of Parliament to the public and the representation of the public voice to Parliament. These are followed by a more theoretical discussion of the implications of digital communications for representative democracy.

Making Parliament visible to the public

The British Parliament was not entirely unprepared for the digital "information revolution." It had been through at least two information revolutions in its earlier history: the printing press and broadcasting. Faced with the emergence of the internet, in 1995 Parliament established an Electronic Publishing Group (EPG), chaired by the editor of *Hansard*. The group had three key decisions to make. First, what sort of information should the public have a right to access online? Second, should online information be provided freely or at a cost? Third, how should information be stored and retrieved?

The first decision seemed to be an obvious one: citizens should have electronic access to daily reports of the proceedings of both Houses of Parliament. In fact, this constituted a specific policy intended to control what might and might not be accessed. For example, the EPG might have decided that citizens were entitled to a record rather than a report of proceedings. Technically, there is no reason why the transcription of speech on the floor of both chambers should not appear online almost immediately; but the convention that allows parliamentarians to "correct" what they have said creates an artificial filter between utterance and dissemination. More importantly, the decision to make available the report of proceedings, as well as written

and oral questions and answers to ministers and committee reports (research papers were added in 1998), assumed that the public would only ever need to know about parliamentary events after they had happened. One could also envisage other areas of parliamentary life that could be made visible online, but have not been for political reasons. For example, the working of the party whips' offices, in which policy deals are struck and MPs are pressurized to vote in certain ways; the Speakers' office, in which the mysterious "usual channels" decide upon questions of constitutional propriety and inter-party compromises; the voting lobbies, where backbench MPs mingle with government ministers and endeavor to promote particular causes. One can think of many political reasons for parliamentarians to want to keep these areas of political life secretive, but the fact that they have never even been considered as candidates for online visibility suggests that such decisions have been based upon institutional rather than democratic norms.

The EPG's second decision concerned whether online information should be provided freely or at a cost to users. The cost of a paper copy of *Hansard* in 1995 was £12 (\$24) a day and electronic access was only available commercially at prohibitive prices in the order of £2500 a year. The Campaign for Freedom of Information (CFOI) complained that "The public is being denied access to *Hansard* and to Britain's laws on the internet because of HMSO's policy of commercially exploiting Crown and Parliamentary copyright ... the Campaign wants HMSO to waive this unacceptable restriction and permit free on-line access to these essential materials." (Campaign for Freedom of Information, 1995.) The EPG agreed with the CFOI, arguing that "As a law-making body, Parliament needs to ensure that those subject to its laws have easy access to them and the law-making

process, and the group believes that there is a clear public right to unfettered access to this material." It recommended that "the full text of parliamentary publications be published free of charge on the internet." However, the EPG qualified its recommendation in two significant ways: first, by insisting that parliamentary papers should be made available internally to members before they were made freely available to citizens via the internet (thereby preventing immediate online publication), and second, by stating that any external body wishing to use material published under parliamentary copyright for the purpose of added-value processing or selling on could only do so by applying and paying for a license agreement.

The third task facing the ECG was to create an online space for the storage and dissemination of parliamentary information. A domain name was acquired (www.parliament.uk) and this, since 1996, has been the representational site of the British Parliament: its virtual manifestation. Establishing a single parliamentary site implies an indexical relationship between the virtual space and physical place of Parliament as an institution. The metaphorical depiction of "parliament online" conjures into being an image of Parliament as an integrated, bounded space with an inside and outside, members and visitors, and official knowledge possessing an elevated status in relation to everyday experience. By designing its own virtual representation, Parliament remains free to impose rules about what constitutes parliamentary politics. The absence of links to political parties, social movements, or sites of counter-information gives rise to a non-agonistic conception of democracy in which the political is institutionally insulated from wider flows of power. Visitors to Parliament via its website, like visitors to the parliamentary estate in Westminster, enter as outsiders

who may not challenge the information that is presented or enter into the debates that are conducted. Parliament online is a political spectacle rather than a site of public deliberation.

That this was not the only model for Parliament's web presence is indicated by the remarkable growth of e-commerce. During the same period that Parliament was beginning to represent itself online, online commerce witnessed a radical change from supplier to demand-based online operations. Taking the travel industry as an illustration, in the mid 1990s most major companies launched sites intended to sell package holidays to online consumers. But consumers wanted to use the internet in other ways: to compare deals between competing companies; learn about consumer experiences of traveling to particular places; and ask the kind of questions that one would prefer to have answered by an impartial expert than by a corporate agent. By using publicly accessible websites that collate disparate reserves of consumer knowledge, travelers have become increasingly liberated from dependence upon single corporate or institutional information stores. Instead of going online to buy holidays, people are increasingly using the internet to construct their own travel plans by mixing and matching data from a variety of sources. The travel industry has been transformed by these trends, with up to a quarter of all U.K. holidays now being booked via the internet. This has weakened corporate power and at the same time expanded consumer choice. Could the same sort of opportunities be offered to online citizens, as distinct from consumers? Might it be to citizens' advantage to move away from institutionally controlled websites and towards knowledge-sharing networks?

In their report on social networking technologies, Mayo and Steinberg (2007: 12–13) refer to “two new groups” of

internet users: people who create online information and those who “take information from various sources, including government, and mix it together to make new tools and services.” The latter group, referred to as “data mashers” are people “who want to mix and combine information to generate valuable new forms of information and new services.” An example of data-mashing from e-commerce is the American retail website, Zillow, which combines information on local land value and house price sales with mapping data to create a service that estimates the value of properties at any given address.

If data can be customized to meet consumer demand in the context of e-commerce, can parliamentary data be remixed in ways that liberate it from institutional control in order to provide citizens with a needs-based account of the day-to-day workings of democracy?

This was the question addressed by the founders of TheyWorkForYou, a site launched in 2004 by independent social hacktivists with the aim of aggregating content from the official *Hansard* reports so that they could be more accessible to the lay public. The site (www.theyworkforyou.com) allows users to track a particular issue or MP, comment on parliamentary proceedings, and register for regular updates on selected themes. Since 1996, TheyWorkForYou has been part of the mySociety project, which, according to its website, aims to “give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives” (MySociety, 2007). By acting as an independent intermediary, mySociety can ignore the silos, routines, and hierarchical sensitivities of institutionally-bound information provision. Rather than Parliament sending a message that “We are your representatives; you may observe us from a distance,” they are saying “We are the citizens and want to hear from you, our elected

representatives.” The mySociety model changes the terms of democratic visibility, using digital technologies to establish a citizen-centric, needs-based approach to parliamentary transparency. This marks a break with institutionally managed approaches to political communication that have hitherto dominated parliamentary information systems and could, if allowed to develop, lead to a greater degree of public understanding and ownership of the legislative process.

Making the public visible to Parliament

For Parliament to be democratic it must both connect with and represent the values and interests of the citizens who voted it into being. Relations between British citizens and their Parliament leave much to be desired. Most British citizens (88 percent) have had no face-to-face contact with their MP within the past year. Three-quarters claim that within the past year they have never seen their MP on television, 80 percent that they have not written to their MP, and 84 percent not to have visited their MP’s website (Coleman, 2006).

Not surprisingly, parliamentarians have looked towards the internet as a way of reinvigorating their weak relationship with the public. In 2002, a report of the House of Commons Information Committee set out five principles that should guide Parliament’s use of the internet, three of which relate specifically to its relationship with members of the public:

- The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.

- The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.
- The House recognizes the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.

In its 2004 report entitled *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, the Modernization Committee endorsed these principles and concluded that “There have now been several experiments with on-line consultation on an ad hoc basis, both by select committees and by all-party groups (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernization, 2004). They have generally been successful and have proved effective as a way of engaging members of the public in the work that we do and of giving a voice to those who would otherwise be excluded. We urge select committees and joint committees considering draft legislation to make on-line consultation a more regular aspect of their work.” In its 2006 report, the Putnam Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, recommended that the “parliamentary website should be radically improved. At a minimum, it should be consultative, interactive and easily navigable.” (Putnam Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, 2006).

Parliament’s commitment to e-democracy was not confined to these modest declarations of intent. Since 1998, a number of parliamentary select, pre-legislative, and all-party committees have collaborated with the Hansard Society, an independent body, to organize a series of online consultations designed to involve members of

the public in various parliamentary inquiries on subjects as diverse as domestic violence, tax credits, stem-cell research, hate crime in Northern Ireland, and diabetes care. These entailed establishing a forum in which members of the public could recount their own experiences, advise MPs to adopt particular policy positions, and interact in online dialogue. These consultations were intended to be deliberative in nature. Generally speaking, participants contributed only one opinion, but a minority of them entered into discussion with one another and with those MPs who chose to participate (Coleman, 2006). An outstanding question for research concerns the extent to which the presence of the public, as an entity comprising diverse values, interests, and preferences, expressed in a range of cultural modes, is really being made visible by these consultations. To what extent do online parliamentary consultations allow citizens to become visible on their own terms?

To answer these questions, I worked with the Hansard Society to construct pre- and post-consultation surveys, which were sent to registered participants in the five online consultations that took place in 2004–5, run on behalf of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Modernisation Committee, Northern Ireland Select Committee, and the House of Lords' Select Committee on the Constitutional Reform Bill. A key aim of these surveys was to find out whether participants believed that they were being acknowledged, heard, and respected in this consultation process. A total of 650 people completed pre-consultation surveys and 212 (33 percent) also completed the post-consultation survey. Since the analysis sought to explore participants' experience of the entire consultation process, only the responses from the 212 people who completed both pre- and post-consultation surveys were analyzed.

When asked in the pre-consultation survey, 44 percent of participants felt that parliament was "out of touch" with people like them and only 20 percent thought that MPs were "interested in listening" to them. In the post-consultation surveys, 73 percent of participants reporting that they had "learned from other posters" and almost one in ten participants (8 percent) reported that they made new contacts with other people as a result of participating. Seventy-two percent of respondents said that they found the consultation in which they participated "worthwhile," of whom 79 percent said that they had learned something new from reading other messages that were posted. Interestingly, 43 percent of those who found the consultation "worthwhile" posted no messages at all, suggesting that the value of these exercises is not purely expressive.

Over half (52 percent) of respondents who regarded the consultation as "worthwhile" had indicated in the pre-consultation survey that "Parliament was out of touch" with them. And over half (60 percent) of those who had regarded Parliament as out of touch in the pre-consultation survey *disagreed* in the post-consultation survey with the statements that "There is not much I can do to change the way the country is run." A small but noteworthy group of respondents (17 percent) not only stated that they had learned from others, but that participating in the consultation had "changed their mind or opinion" in some way. Half of these people had previously expressed (in the pre-consultation survey) that Parliament was "out of touch," which was reversed after participation, with 75 percent of them taking the view that MPs were "listening to them", and 40 percent believing that the consultation process would "make a difference." The attitude changes of this group suggest that meaningful deliberative exchanges can

occur in the setting of a well-run online consultation.

But not all participants in these consultations were convinced that by posting their views on a website they would become visible to their elected representatives. In response to an open-ended question about the value of participating, one respondent stated that:

I think it is important at the start to declare openly how exactly the online consultation will feed into the final conclusions of those who have asked for it to be conducted. At no time was it clear whether the participants' contribution would have any real significance in the final outcome ...

Another respondent suggested that:

There should be a clear response from parliamentarians to those who took part in the consultation, otherwise after spending hours on an online consultation there is a feeling that it has been a waste of time.

Clerks and specialist advisors to the committees involved in the online consultations were asked whether they thought that the internet had given them access to a greater range of experience and expertise than they would have received from the usual pool of witnesses. Responses were generally quite positive:

We undoubtedly got some views that we wouldn't otherwise have heard, some of which were worth hearing and some of which missed the point ... (clerk)

... It did prove to be an avenue in which people could contribute who otherwise might not have done so ... All I can say is that the

nature and experiences mediated through the contributions were quite often of a different nature from the, sort of, institutional contributions we would normally expect to get. (clerk)

I think with the online consultation you lower the threshold of effort that's required to participate in the inquiry, so the people that you bring are the people who wouldn't go to the trouble of drafting a memorandum and editing it and printing it out and posting it in and so on, but might just post a few sentences on a message board. (clerk)

I think it was a useful exercise, primarily, in giving myself, managing the inquiry, and to a lesser extent, I think, the members, a good grounding in the issues and some of the sensitivities that were involved. (specialist advisor)

Despite this recognition by officials that online consultations were broadening the range of people giving evidence to Parliament, several were of the view that these particular online consultations had a very limited impact upon MPs' deliberations. In one case a committee was unsure about how to regard the status of this kind of evidence:

... it turned out that one of the members objected quite strongly to what were essentially anonymous comments ... And, therefore, it became difficult to actually directly draw upon that evidence, so in a sense its contribution to the report was indirect rather than direct ... (specialist advisor)

Some interviewees took the view that the consultations were limited by the absence of interaction between consultees and MPs:

I think for it to have more effect, for it to impact on them and on the way they [MPs] conduct the inquiry, and the conclusions they come up with, I think they need to be exposed to it directly. And it's a difficult thing. Engaging members at all is difficult. You are actually asking them to do something that's beyond what they would normally be prepared to do. So I think you would have to ... maybe identify a small number of individuals who would be prepared to take on a more active role. (specialist advisor)

The evidence here is mixed. Clearly, both participants and officials who experienced the parliamentary consultations recognized that a process of mutual visibility was occurring, but there was little confidence in the prospect of this having a tangible political impact. Virtual participants are still outsiders whose political presence can be overlooked precisely because they are physically absent.

Speaking for ...

The reality is that the citizens of a representative democracy *cannot* be truly present at the point of policy formation and legislative decision-making. That is why they need to be represented. Political representation becomes necessary when citizens are removed—physically, cognitively, or otherwise—from the locus of public decision-making and their interests, preferences, and values have to be expressed via an aggregating medium. If all could be fully present and attentive within the political sphere at all times representation would be theoretically unnecessary. Speaking *for* the public entails mediating between the absent and the present.

Democratic theorists' thinking about representation has tended to revolve

around two apparently opposed versions of democracy: ancient and modern, direct and indirect, participatory and representative, Burkean and Rousseauan. On the one hand, democracy is seen as empowering people directly, and on the other, it is seen as investing power in professional governors or politicians who represent the people. The history that goes with this dichotomy is as familiar as the contrast itself. Ancient democracy offered direct rule by the people. But the emergence of large, pluralistic nation states, along with a liberal, negative conception of freedom, resulted in a transition to representative forms of democracy. Direct rule was replaced by indirect governance. This transition ushered in an enduring quarrel between those who sought to recover direct democracy by giving power back to the people, or by at least closely circumscribing the initiative of representatives, and those who argued that representatives should be left to govern as their judgment dictates.

The partisans of direct democracy see the representative as the ventriloquist's dummy: an aggregate channel for all the collective voices being represented. As democratically represented citizens, say direct democrats, our task is to control the representative dummy and slap it when it assumes to speak on its own. We are represented because our representative speaks as if we were speaking ourselves. The advocates of "representative democracy" see the representative as the ventriloquist and the people as the dummy. The representative speaks, but in the people's name. We are represented because our representatives speak on our behalf. They are the trustees of our collective interests. We do not elect them to do what we might do ourselves; we elect them because we do not have the time—or maybe the competence—constantly to make policy decisions for ourselves. For indirect democrats, the notion that it is

the people who speak is something of a pretence, just as the notion that the dummy speaks is a pretence. It is the representative, like the ventriloquist, who is really in charge.

A striking feature of this enduring quarrel is that the two sides have tended to share an understanding of representative democracy itself, disagreeing about its value, but not about its empirical attributes. Both positions in democratic theory tend to understand representative democracy as being an etiolated version of normative democracy, according citizens the right to depose or re-elect a leader every few years, but not much more. As Joseph Schumpeter (1976: 284), a famous defender of indirect democracy, put it: "Democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule'. Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them."

Direct democrats, quoting Rousseau, contend that contemporary representative democracy is but a parody of self-rule. Democracy, they argue, must directly involve citizens in all decision-making or it is nothing. The Burkeans and the Schumpeterians reply that representative democracy might not be wholly democratic, but it is the closest approximation we can get in the modern world to the real thing—and has some crucial advantages insofar as it ensures that well-educated specialists, rather than the mob, are really in charge.

For all its pedigree, the theoretical debate between direct, inclusive democracy and indirect, constitutionally balanced representation is hardly compelling, for it totally ignores the possibility of the options in between: systems of democratic rule that, while preserving the representative framework, ensure that, through ongoing dialogue, debate, and argument, the public

retains a degree of authority over representatives, even between elections.

In fact, the Rousseauan characterization of modern representative government as no more than the chance to elect a master every four years was always something of a caricature. A range of channels have given representatives and the represented opportunities to connect with each other. Demonstrations, petitions, letters, and pamphlets have allowed the public to express their view to representatives. Press conferences, TV and newspaper interviews, phone-ins, speeches, and parliamentary debates have allowed representatives to become more democratically visible to the public. Public meetings, political parties, and MPs' surgeries have allowed citizens and representatives to exchange views with each other. But this relationship has never been anything like an easy, equal one. The public has generally been spoken at, rather than with. Though not ignored as such, citizens were not invited to join the club. The public has been traditionally patronized, feared, or seduced.

As citizens have become less deferential, society more diverse, and technologies of communication more interactive, citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation. Techniques based on the broadcast-megaphone model simply do not provide the requisite depth and richness of political interaction between representatives and represented in the age of the internet. While acknowledging that representation must entail being spoken for, there are clear signs that the contemporary public demands from its democracy something closer to a full-blooded, two-way relationship. For this relationship to be satisfied, democratic theorists and practitioners might need to turn their attention to a hybrid between direct and indirect models of democracy, which I would refer to as direct representation: a democratic system in which

citizens are spoken for. Citizens do not want to go through the time-consuming process of examining and voting upon every area of policy and piece of new legislation, but they do want to be consulted and involved as individuals in the decisions that affect their own lives, and they are entitled to feel that their contribution will be valued and might at least make a difference.

Hanna Pitkin, in her magisterial survey, *The Concept of Representation*—one of the few notable works on representation to have been written in modern times—understood well the necessity for democratic representation to be rooted in two-way communication (Pitkin, 1967: 209–10):

representing ... means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. The representative must act independently; his action must involve discretion and judgment; he must be the one who acts. The represented must also be conceived as capable of independent action and judgment, not merely being taken care of. And, despite the resulting potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done, the conflict must not normally take place. The representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs, an explanation is called for. He must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest.

The kind of democratic representation that Pitkin describes is clearly different from what exists at present. Politicians are not generally seen as being “responsive” to citizens and conflict is not usually

avoided as a result of clear “explanation” being given. Although politicians are more visible to citizens than they have ever been before, and vice versa, the impressions of one another received via the mass media create and reinforce crude caricatures rather than anything resembling a communicatively rich relationship. Digital ICT could play a vital role in changing the terms of that relationship, transcending the distances that have traditionally made it impossible to think of representation in conversational terms. But this role is unlikely to be played out within the institutionally managed space of the official parliamentary website.

As with e-commerce, the most empowering developments are likely to occur in spaces opened up by opportunities to remix information and shift the balance of communication in the direction of citizens. The nature of these putative democratic spaces must remain largely speculative at the moment, for, with the limited exception of the mySociety sites, such as TheyWorkForYou discussed earlier, there are few working examples to which we can point.

But what form might digitally enabled parliamentary communication take, if citizens are to become more visible and audible in the democratic process? First, it could take a more joined-up form. Most citizens are not particularly interested in Parliament, as such, but in policies that affect their lives. As political scientists have been suggesting for some years, governance has become increasingly decentered: it does not take place within bounded institutions, but among and between them. Professional lobbyists, working on behalf of well-resourced elites, do not track policy formation and decision-making on an institution-by-institution basis, first looking at government departments, then Parliament, then specific agencies. Policy is best understood as a process in which power flows in

several directions at once, often ignoring or circumnavigating constitutional boundaries and cycles. For citizens to be politically informed, they need information that tracks issues rather than reports on specific institutions. In the U.K., some people are represented by local councils, the Westminster Parliament, a devolved parliament or assembly, and the European Parliament, not to mention the many other intermediary agencies rooted in bureaucracies and civil society. Effectively informed citizens need tracking systems that can map the political process for them, showing them where issues have reached and how and when they can intervene with a view to affecting decisions.

As well as information tracking, citizens need to be able to track the flow of public communication. At the moment, most people have to rely upon media reports of what the public thinks (usually derived from crude opinion polling) or casually produced vox pops, phone-ins, or television-studio discussions (Coleman and Ross, 2008). Attempting to monitor public opinion by going to most political chat rooms or blogs is rather like going into a pub before closing time to get a sense of public discourse. Fortunately, new digital tools, such as Issue Crawler, which searches the web to establish where issues are being discussed and how those discussions are linked, are able to map the communicative landscape, which makes it easier to sense where a debate has come from and where it is leading before entering into it (Bruns, 2007). Few political researchers, lobbyists, or politicians would expect to be able to contribute to serious debate without having a sense of how issues have emerged and which actors are most engaged in pursuing them. Why should we expect lay citizens to do so?

Linked to these tools of political information-gathering and communication-mapping is a need for legitimate online spaces in which political representatives

and represented citizens can exchange views and seek clarification from one another. Jay Blumler and I have argued the case for the establishment of an online civic commons in which public deliberation on local, national, and global issues can take a visible form (Coleman and Blumler, 2001; 2008). Unlike the present U.K. parliamentary website—and that of almost all other national legislatures—to which citizens are invited as a passive audience, contemporary democracy, if it is to meet the challenge of direct representation, needs to find imaginative ways of realizing active and interactive citizenship. For, as Hannah Arendt argued, the “political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’” (Arendt, 1958: 198).

Conclusion

It would be glibly deterministic to posit a democratizing relationship between the internet as a communication technology and Parliament as an institution. One might just as reasonably regard the internet as a social institution and Parliament as a political technology. The relationship between one and the other is shaped by political culture, which is in turn shaped by the varied and unpredictable interplay of institutional needs and technological capacities.

Contemporary representative democracy is played out within the dialectics of visibility. How can power make itself seen, felt, and understood by the public? How can the public, as the legitimizing basis of parliamentary power, make sure that its presence is acknowledged and respected by its representatives? And how can representation come to perform the subtle trick of appearing to embody as well as act in trust for the public? As I have tried to show in this chapter, digital technologies are implicated in each of

these dialectical strategies. In seeking to be visible to the public, Parliament has attempted to manage the terms of its own visibility, but that is a losing battle, as the Web 2.0 data-mashers are demonstrating. In seeking to become present to their representatives, citizens have colluded with managed consultations, but these are no substitute for a trusted civic space in which the public can deliberate under its own auspices. The challenge of representing the public, long argued over in sterile debates between indirect trusteeship and direct plebiscites, is met by the feasibility of direct representation. Of course, there is nothing inevitable about these outcomes; the path between democratic potential and realization is rarely a smooth one. The rather sad tale of the attempt to exempt British MPs from freedom of information legislation does not augur well for e-democratic anticipations. But the technologies are there, becoming more ubiquitous all the time. Representative democracies must either engage with them or face the risk of being sidelined.

Guide to further reading

To follow up ideas raised in this chapter, there are two areas of literature to be consulted. First, there are relevant collections of research on the changing role of legislative institutions, including Giddings (2005); the special issue of *Parliamentary Affairs* on "Parliament in the Age of the Internet" 52(3) (1999); the special issue of *Information Polity* on "the use of ICT by members of parliament" 9(2) (2004); and the special issue of the *Journal of Legislative Studies* 13(3) on "legislatures and e-democracy" (2007). On the representation of Parliament to the public, see Setala and Gronlund (2006); Shahin and Neuhold (2007); Coleman (2006). On the representation of the public voice to Parliament, see Coleman (2004) and Albrecht (2006).

A second area of research that might be pursued in relation to this chapter considers the changing nature of political representation. The classic text is Pitkin (1967). See also Norton (2007); Coleman and Blumler (2001); and Coleman (2005).