

E-DEMOCRACY IN ACTION: WEBSITES OF FINNISH MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

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Abstract

Internet is a too valuable tool to be left just for the businessmen. Modern governmental activity can benefit a lot from the use of the Internet. Web-sites and active participating in web-based activities is and should be an integral activity in the life of political actors. Parliament members are in a central position, as they have a lot of political power, and they are often so far from the electors both mentally and physically, that keeping in touch with electronic means becomes a necessity.

First, we briefly discuss the concepts of eGovernment and eDemocracy, and situate Members of Parliament's www-pages in that context. Second, we survey on the websites of Finnish Members of Parliament is based on a survey completed in September 2006. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

1 Introduction

Internet technology is penetrating every aspect of modern life. We speak of e-commerce, e-learning, e-health, of e-everything. Neither is the area of electronic government neglected. Authorities have a legislative mandate to perform their duties, and, in addition, they can have other commercially oriented action domains, such as universities having development projects in co-operation with companies, but these are usually not included in the domain of electronic Government (hereafter, eGovernment). eGovernment is usually connected to a national administration, but can be seen at many levels, from multinational institutions (UN, EC/EU? etc), through national governments to local-level activities such as regional and municipal administrations. Where there exists a strong state-church connection, ecclesiastic services may even be included in the concept.

Not even political life can escape the power of the Internet. “*An exciting new technology like the World-Wide-Web is simply too much for a politician to overlook*” (Berghel 1996). Members of Parliaments’ websites are becoming strong channels for providing political information and for conducting political activities and decision-making.

The applications of www-technology in politics are many. Websites can be a major channel for political activism. (Brown 2000) Websites are widely used by political journalists and influence their reporting. (Reilly 2004) In the USA in particular, www is an important channel for political fund-raising. (Wilner 2004) Retired or off-duty politicians can use websites to maintain their political life. (Jarvis 2003) Different tools are being developed through which electors can compare and weigh up the manifestos and opinions of political decision-makers. (O’Leary 2000)

Our research here is divided into several sub-topics, and our theoretical research questions are:

1. *What is the relationship between eGovernment, eDemocracy and the application of websites by Members of Parliament?*
2. *How can the adoption process of websites by Members of Parliament be understood?*

Further, we report a small empirical study on the websites of Finnish Members of Parliament. Here the research question is:

1. *What is the current state of the art of the websites of Finnish Members of Parliament?*

Our article unfolds as follows. In section 2, we perform a conceptual analysis of eGovernment and eDemocracy and discuss the role of www-technology used by Members of Parliament in this context. In the final section, the state of the art of the websites of Finnish Members of Parliament in Autumn 2006 is rudimentarily analysed. Finally, in section 4 conclusions are drawn.

2 eGovernment, eDemocracy and the websites of Members of Parliament

eGovernment is interpreted here as a generic term meaning all electronic contacts between citizens and their government. It is divided into two main areas: first, eDemocracy, catering for democratic processes in government, and secondly, an area that is less well established, but could be called Electronic Governmental Transactions (EGT), containing many applications such as health care (eHealth), taxation, public procurement and police operations, to mention some examples. This is in accordance with the definition of (Leigh and Atkinson 2001): “*All countries are concerned with 1) the quality of the developing on-line services and 2) how digital government can contribute to public participation and competence as the basis for a more democratic administration and democratic society*” (cited in (Holzer, Hu et al. 2004)). In a related fashion, (Aicholzer and Schmutzer 2000) define eGovernment as a process that leads to

- Transformation of the business of governance, i.e., improving service quality delivery, reducing costs and renewing administrative processes.
- Transformation of government itself, i.e., re-examining the functioning of democratic practices and processes.

eGovernment

eGovernment is usually presented as using IT to (Grönlund 2002):

- Provide easy access to government information and services for citizens and businesses
- Increase the quality of services, by such things as increased speed, completeness and process efficiency
- Give citizens opportunities to participate in the democratic process.

Silcock (Silcock 2001) defines eGovernment as follows: “*...the use of technology to enhance the access to delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees.*”

Better quality services, especially in terms of speed and reduced cost, are also a key ingredient of eGovernment, according to the (European Commission 2000): transaction services, such as electronic forms, are perceived as the future of electronic government.

The focus is typically on external services, but another important idea is also to use new technologies to make internal government operations more efficient. One important point is to view a government as a customer-oriented organisation. The idea behind many eGovernment projects is to make it possible for citizens to carry out their governmental transactions on the Internet.

Banerjee & Chau (Banerjee and Chau 2004) provide the following illustration of the fast development of eGovernment: in 1996, less than 50 official government homepages could be found on the World Wide Web. In 2001, it was estimated that globally there were well over 50 000 official government websites. Of the 190 UN Member States, 169 were providing some degree of information and services on-line.

In the US, the State eGovernment strategy delivers the following summary of proceedings in the field: *“Federal information technology spending in the United States will exceed \$48 billion in 2002 and \$52 billion in 2003... a good portion of current federal IT spending is devoted to Internet Initiatives, yielding over 35 million web pages online at over 22,000 web sites.”*

eDemocracy

eDemocracy refers to democratic practice in cyberspace. (Wilhelm 2000) refers to demographic practice in the public sphere. He further defines the public sphere as follows: *“The vital channels in civil society in which individuals and groups can become informed about issues, discuss and debate these issues autonomously, and ultimately have an impact on policy agendas.”* As cited in (Wilhelm 2000), the public sphere is the *“sphere of social interaction between economy and state, including the sphere of associations, social movements, and other forms of public communication”* (Cohen and Arato 1992).

The Internet is incontestably the most important public sphere available today. Online public spaces can provide flexible and interactive outlets for dialogue, and document the dynamic, as values shift and demands for transparency increase (Geiselhart 2004). (Schuler 2000) also emphasises the effect of modern ICT on democratic processes: *“ICT provides tools for strong democracy, such as email, forums and online access to documents.”* (Rheingold 1991) also states that new media can help *“to gather critical information, organize political action, sway public opinion and guide policy making”*.

(Hagen 2005) states that *“Electronic Democracy is any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process – such as information and communication, interest articulation and aggregation, and decision-making”*. He further divides electronic democracy into three sub-topics: Cyberdemocracy, Teledemocracy and Electronic Democratisation. (Tsagarousianou, Tambini et al. 1998) also define three sub-fields of eDemocracy in a slightly different fashion: information provision, deliberation, and participation in decision-making.

(Hacker and van Dick 1999) define digital democracy as *“the use of ICTs and computer-mediated communication to enhance active participation of citizens and to support the collaboration between actors for policy-making purposes without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions in democratic communication, whether acting as citizens, their elected representatives, or on behalf of administrations, parliaments or associations within the political processes of all stages of governance”*. This definition is also adopted and cited in the EU-financed and -coordinated Prisma Project (Kubicek, Westholm et al. 2003).

Macintosh (Macintosh 2004, 2) defines e-democracy as: *“e-democracy is concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy”*

(Williamson 2004) defines a five-level maturity model of eDemocracy:

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|---|----------|---|
| 1 | access | getting access to discussion and material |
| 2 | literacy | understanding the material and the media restrictions |

- | | | |
|---|---------------|---|
| 3 | content | having meaningful and relevant content |
| 4 | creation | taking part in content creation oneself |
| 5 | dissemination | publishing new material beyond individual community boundaries. |

(Welch 2003) defines two goals for eGovernment applications to support eDemocracy: transparency and interactivity. The more transparent and interactive an institution's web-pages are, the more they encourage trust in citizens.

Websites of Members of Parliament

Members of Parliament are very central actors in the eGovernment field, and a key group for eDemocracy. So their application of www-technology and the Internet in general should be an important topic. Academic research on the topic seems, however, to be very scarce. Many write tangentially on the topic, but we found widely-published empirical academic research on the topic in just one article. (Jackson and Lilleker 2004) report, among other things, on the websites of British Members of Parliament. Data collection was performed according to 32 items, which is almost the same as the 35 we used, listed in Table 2. In their article, they conclude that websites and e-mail still remain under-utilised communication tools for Members of Parliament.

3 Finnish Member of Parliament's websites – some empirical analysis from year 2006

In our empirical research, we studied the personal websites of the Finnish Members of Parliament, 200 of them in all. Data collection was made in September-October 2006. This article is a continuum to the data collection made in April 2005, and reported in (Suomi 2006). The timing should have been good, as Finland had parliament elections in March 2007. It is natural to expect that Members of Parliament should be especially active especially before the elections.

Usually a Member of Parliament has three or four different sites:

1. the official site maintained by Parliament
2. the official site maintained by his/her party
3. the official site of the parliamentary party group (maintained by the party), sometimes associated with the previous
4. the official personal site, maintained by the Member of Parliament and his/her staff.

We concentrated our studies on the pages that the Members of Parliament are personally responsible for (group four above), and whose contents and settings they can edit. At this level, differences in the www-sites may occur. When the pages are maintained by the parliament or by the party, they follow an universal format, and differences between the different sites are hard to see.

We performed the analysis with the Google search engine during September-October 2006. All data was input into an Excel sheet, and it is further analyzed by Excel and SPSS.

The data we collected are reported in Table 1. Items 1-4 were collected from data outside the Internet.

The item 36, integration of a blog, is added to the survey as a new element since year 2005. A blog is a personal diary, published in the web, often in a reverse order (latest entry on top). In an Australian study, the importance of blogs in political life was notified already as early as 2003 (Parliament of Victoria and Committee 2003, 114): “The recent rapid growth in interest in blogs, in particular, and their tendency to be used to make comment in the public domain on matters of public interest, indicates the rapid adoption of online publishing tools within the Victorian community.”

Table 2 Data collected from the Finnish Members of Parliament’s websites

1. name
2. party
3. electoral district
4. number of votes in last elections
5. portrait, yes/no
6. age mentioned, yes/no
7. municipality of residence mentioned, yes/no
8. family members mentioned, yes/no
9. education mentioned, yes/no
10. career reported, yes/no
11. working address given, yes/no
12. home address given, yes/no
13. mobile phone number given, yes/no
14. fixed-line work phone number given, yes/no
15. e-mail address given, yes/no
16. link to party site given, yes/no
17. link in the parliamentary site to official personal site given, yes/no
18. list of publications given, yes/no
19. Curriculum Vitae (CV) given, yes/no
20. political manifesto given, yes/no
21. a ready-to-fill contact form given, yes/no
22. assistants represented, yes/no
23. identical information in Finnish and English, yes/no
24. identical information in Finnish and Swedish, yes/no
25. meeting calendar, yes/no
26. meeting calendar history, yes/no
27. meeting calendar future, yes/no
28. samples of publications and speeches made outside Parliament, yes/no
29. number of Google hits
30. the personal site ranking in Google
31. used domain, fi/net/com/ws/org/other
32. number of picture elements on the site
33. data of last site update given, yes/no
34. the URL of the site
35. existence of the personal site, no/yes/several/not functioning
36. a blog integrated to the site

Together we found 175 working sites, which means that 87,5% of Finnish Members of Parliament (total 200) maintain a personal www-site. Our analysis will concentrate on these 175 pages.

We divide our analysis here to four categories:

- 1 Address and basic elements of the website
- 2 Contact data of the Member of Parliament
- 3 Representation of the Member or Parliament
- 4 Interactivity of the website

Our analysis here does not report on every item of the data collected.

Address and basic elements of the website

The most common domain name used was .fi, which accounted for 99 sites. The distribution of the sites to different domain names can be seen in Table 3

Table 3 Different domain names used in Finnish Members of Parliament's websites

	#	percent of the 175 sites
.fi	99	56,6
.com	9	5,1
.net	59	33,7
.org	4	22,8
.ws	1	5,7
not known	3	1,7

Finland and especially the Finnish Parliament is supposed to be bilingual: Finnish and Swedish should both be used. 28 (16%) websites offered the same information both in Finnish and Swedish. Foreign immigration to Finland is currently strong, and many inhabitants can not master Finnish or Swedish. Of the websites, 24 (13,7%) offered identical information in Finnish and English.

Every site studied contained at least one picture. Graphical elements were otherwise too richly represented in the www-site. 69 sites (39,4%) contained 10 or more graphical elements and 10 sites (5,7%) 40 or more graphical elements.

Of the sites, 29 (16,6%) contained data about the last update of the site. 146 sites (83,4%) did not report when the site was last updated. All web-sited with update information had been updated within the last year.

Contact data of the Member of Parliament

Contact data to the Member of Parliament was given as reported in Table 4. As customary in the Nordic countries, mobile phone communication is seen as a natural and preferable mode of communication, 81,7 % of the sites give the mobile phone number of the Member of Parliament. E-mail address was published by all but 4 Members of Parliament.

Table 4 Contact data given in Finnish Members of Parliament's websites

	#	percent of the 175 sites
Working mail address	125	71,4
Home mail address	38	21,7

Mobile phone number	143	81,7
Fixed line phone number to work	142	81,1
e-mail address	171	97,7

A personal calendar containing future public presentations and meeting places was published by 79 (45,1%) Members of Parliament, but 96 (54,9%) did not give contact points where citizens could meet them in person.

Representation of the Member or Parliament

A complete CV was published by 68 Members of Parliament (38,9%), also not by 108 Member of Parliament (61,1%). A publication list was published by exactly the same number, 68 Members of Parliament, not by 108 members. This does not anyway mean that the same persons would publish CV:s and publication lists.

All of the websites contained the picture of the Member of Parliament.

A document that could be interpreted to be a political manifesto was found in 86 sites (49,1%), one was not available in 89 sites (50,9%).

Interactivity of the website

A blog was present in 53 websites (30,3%), 123 did not contain a personal blog (69,7%). 38 (21,7%) of the websites contained a pre-programmed form for taking contact, 137 sites (78,3%) did not contain this functionality.

As a summary of the websites of Members of Parliament, we can conclude that they can be divided into three groups. One quarter of the members is not using websites, and one quarter is using them excellently. About half of the Members of Parliament maintain websites, but do not do it very diligently.

5 Conclusions

Political life has been slow to awake to the demands of modern Internet technology, but can no longer escape facing up to the demands of the Internet community. Younger generations in particular are accused of lacking interest in politics, and their engagement in political activity could be strengthened through active use of the Internet.

In our conceptual analysis, we categorised eDemocracy as a sub-topic of eGovernment. Members of Parliament are in a central position in eDemocracy, but the academic world has conducted very little empirical research into their websites.

In our analysis of the websites of the Finnish Members of Parliament, we found that 87,5% of the members have a working personal website. About one quarter of the members are doing little or no work with websites, and one quarter are working excellently with them. About half of the Members of Parliament maintain websites, but do not do it diligently.

Our study will continue with more complicated and deep analyses of the collected data. Additional theory to give ramifications to the conclusions is also required.

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