PART 1

PARLIAMENTS, CITIZENS, AND THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Chapter 1
The Continuing Impact of ICT on the World of Parliaments

ICT TRENDS AND SOCIETY

The development of the personal computer, the invention of the Internet, the expansion of the World Wide Web, and the growth of mobile communications are redesigning the landscape of today's society. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have become a key enabler of economic and social advancements and the cause of changes that are occurring at an unprecedented pace with profound impact on a global scale.

The pervasiveness of ICT has not only revolutionized the way production, market access and distribution of goods and services are organized, but it has significantly modified business models and the way enterprises relate to consumers. The Internet and the use of web-based instruments have led to new communication modalities that have forced traditional media – TV, radio and newspapers – to devise new strategies and alternative scenarios for the future of mass communication. In sectors like trade, education, health, banking and agriculture, technology developments have transformed the way users, consumers, producers and clients connect to each other. ICT have also made it possible for people to acquire and exchange information in an increasing variety of formats and to collaborate with one another across national boundaries.

For millions of "digital natives" the daily use of social media and other Internet-based communication technologies is an essential and natural aspect of their life. They employ them to stay connected to each other, to obtain news and information, and to generate content and knowledge.

Statistics show that the use of these technologies has dramatically increased. In six years the number of Facebook active users has reached 400 million, growing from 100 million to 350 million between 2008 and 2009 alone (see Figure 1.1). Today, seven of the top 20 sites accessed by Internet users belong to the family of social websites (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.1: Growth in Facebook users 2004-2010
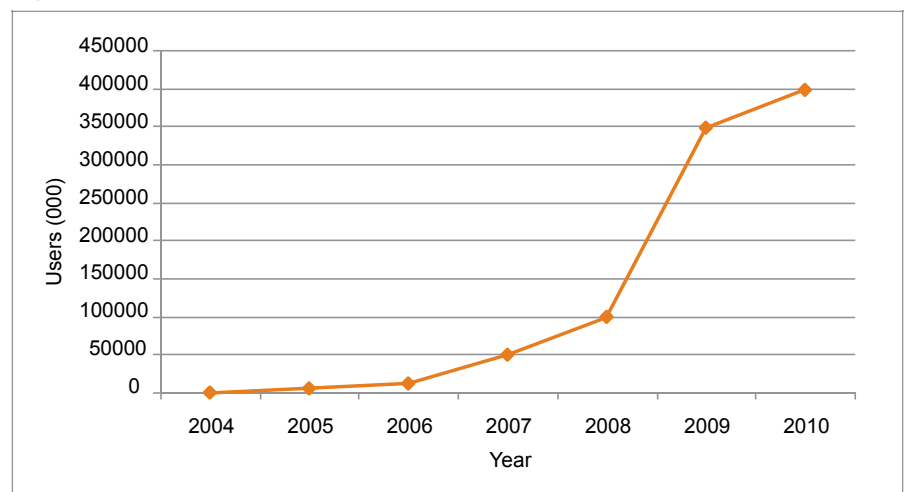
(Source: Facebook.com)

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In this new environment, the spread of Internet connectivity and mobile technologies are becoming essential to economic and social activities and the main instruments of communication and networking. In 2008 subscriptions to mobile carriers surpassed the 4 billions mark and are now estimated at 4.6 billions. In 2009 there were an estimated 1.7 billion Internet users (see Figure 1.3).

Mobile technology is growing most rapidly, especially in developing countries. As stated by the Secretary General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU): "It looks highly likely that global mobile cellular teledensity will surpass 100% within the next decade, and probably earlier".[1] High speed Internet capacity also continues to grow, although at a slower pace. As these trends and technologies come together they will provide the means for nearly universal connectivity.

Figure 1.2: Social websites ranked among top 20 by usage

#2	Facebook
#4	YouTube
#6	Wikipedia
#7	Blogger
#12	Twitter
#17	Wordpress
#18	Myspace

(Source: Alexa.com, 8 March 2010)

Figure 1.3: Growth in mobile subscriptions and Internet users 1997 – 2009 (in millions)
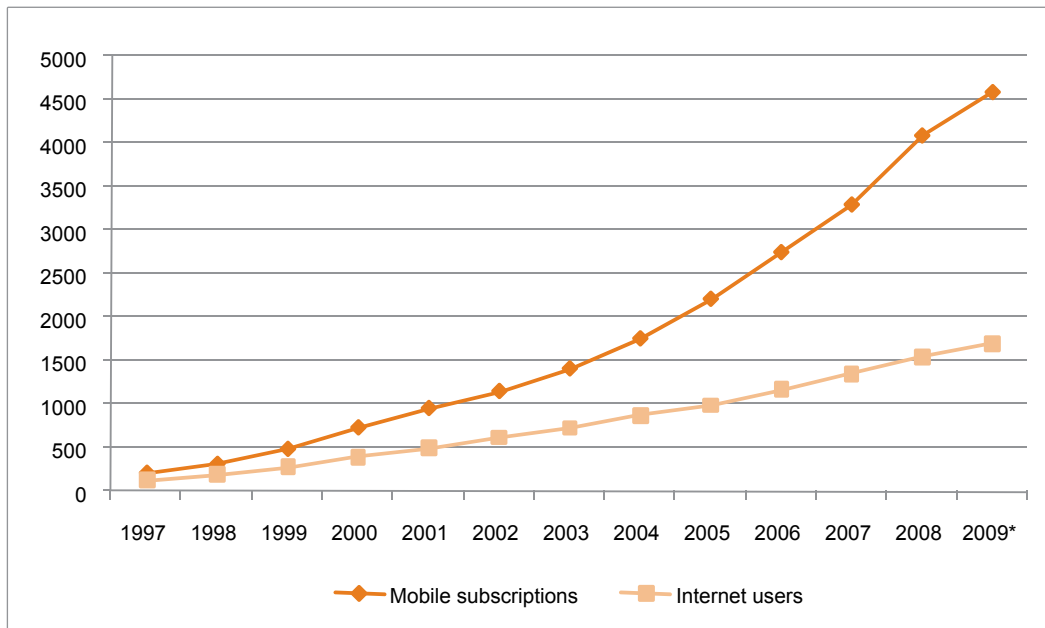
(Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database. * Estimated)

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE

This dynamic growth and continuous evolution of the Information Society is having important consequences for public governance institutions, politicians and officials, civil society organizations and ordinary citizens, in both developed and developing countries.

From the advent of the printing press to the invention of radio and television, innovations in technology have influenced the ways in which political institutions exercise their role in society and interact with citizens. Today, the same institutions are grappling with this new wave of tech-

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1   "Mobile Marvels: A Special Report on Telecoms in Emerging Markets", *The Economist,* 24 September 2009, pp. 1-19.

nological change that is once again altering the economic, social and political environment, the governance process and the way dialogue between government entities and the public takes place.

The emergence of a new kind of public sphere – based on the Internet and new forms of social connectivity – is leading to an expansion of the democratic arena and to a potential renewal of the relationship between politics and citizens. New technologies and the use of networks have provided tools for increased participation of the public in political life. Citizens have more opportunities to be informed, higher expectations to make their voice heard, and the possibility to organize themselves into groups and social movements.

Notably, the expansion of opportunities to participate in the political process has coincided with a decline of trust in political institutions and a growing citizens' disaffection from politics.

As highlighted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2006 (see Figure 1.4), parliaments as institutions do not stand high in public esteem, though there are significant regional differences.[2]

Figure 1.4: Trust in national institutions: regional averages
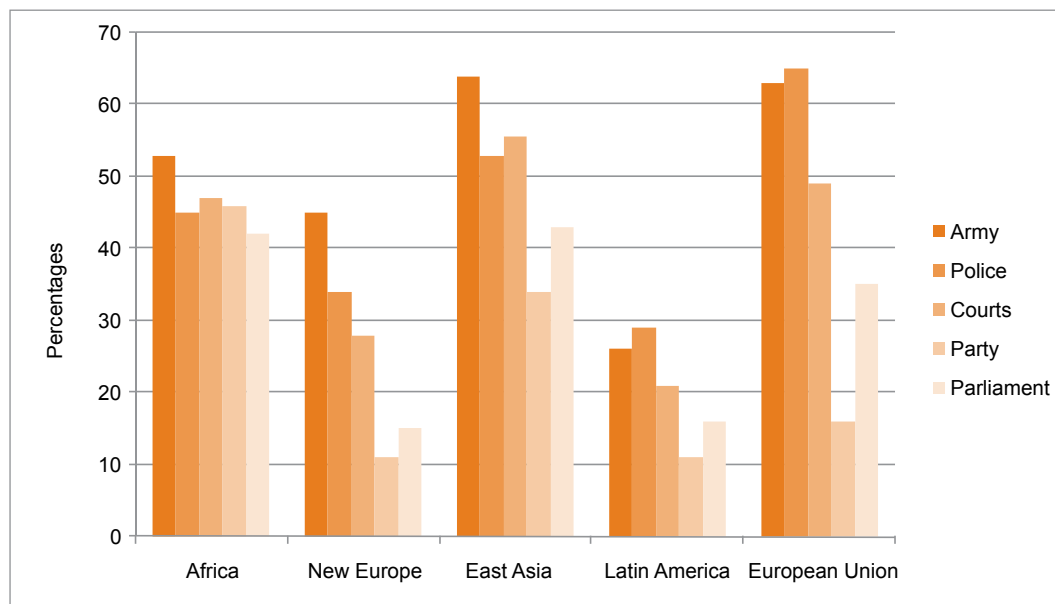
A worldwide opinion poll commissioned by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in September 2009,[3] while confirming a widespread support for democracy, showed that citizens around the world have deep misgivings about the way political life functions in their own countries. "There is a gap between public aspirations for democratic governance and vigorous public debate, and the widely-held perception of political life as a closed space where there is little room for dissent and real consideration of alternative policy options".[4]

As further pointed out by Manuel Castells, a noted scholar of communications and the Information Society, the decline of political trust does not necessarily translate into the decline of political participation or in decreased civic engagement. Data on the participation in the past three presidential elections in the United States of America, for example, demonstrate that political

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2   For a full interpretation of the results presented in the figure see Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Good Practice*, Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006, p.110.
3   WorldPublicOpinion.Org, *World Public Opinion on Political Tolerance: A Study of 24 Nations*, Washington, D.C.: WorldPublicOpinion.Org, 2009.
4   Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Opening speech, World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington. D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].

engagement in the country is increasing. In developing countries, citizens showing less trust in politics are those who are more civically engaged. According to Castells, "it is precisely this growing distance between belief in political institutions and desire for political action that constitutes the crisis of democracy".[5]

At the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, the Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy asked whether faith in democracy and the democratic process is imperiled at the very moment when it is more open and accessible.[6] A similar concern was voiced by a member of the Swedish Parliament:

> "Sweden is an extensive user of the Internet. Most citizens are connected and government agencies use the web as a tool to provide services to citizens. Sweden is ranked high in e-government according to the United Nations. And yet, the level of e-participation is low. A study by the World Internet Institute reported that only 14% of citizens agree that they can influence politicians through the Internet and only 7% believe the Internet will give people more political power. How can we improve the situation so more people believe they can use e-democracy, use e-government to have an impact? Our members tweet and blog and use Facebook but still people do not trust the technology. Do people not trust the technology or do they not trust politicians?"[7]

Scholars and researchers are expanding the scope of their investigations and proposing a variety of views regarding political trust, legitimacy of the institutions, and the changing relation between politics and media. However, consensus has emerged among them on the vast opportunities that technology provides to raise the quality of democratic governance and to overcome some of the challenges that confront many governing institutions. At issue is how best to use these instruments to open new avenues for participation and civic engagement to build trust and legitimacy.

GOVERNING AT A TIME OF TECHNOLOGY CHANGE

During the past decades, many executive and legislative bodies throughout the world have begun to adopt ICT to become more transparent, more accountable, and more efficient. They have invested significant resources to modernize their operations and to implement new technology-based approaches to performing traditional governmental functions.

Since their advent, e-government services have continued to improve and many now compare favorably with the appeal and satisfaction of those offered successfully in the private sector.[8] A number of surveys have documented the fact that the volume of information and the extent of online services provided by political institutions are growing world-wide. In 2008 Darrel West reported that 96% of government websites offered publications that citizens can access and that 75% offered databases.[9] These figures were up from 2001, when they were found to be 75% and 41% respectively. By 2008 services that citizens could utilize fully online were available on 50% of national websites, up significantly from 28% the previous year and only 8% in 2001.

5   Castells, Manuel, *Communication Power,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.295.
6   Maurizio Lupi, Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].
7   Eliza Roszkowska Öberg, Member of the Parliament of Sweden, Intervention at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].
8   Foreseeresults.com, "E-Government Satisfaction Index", *American Customer Satisfaction Index* (ACSI) Q4/26 January 2010.
9   West, Darrell M, *Improving Technology Utilization in Electronic Government Around the World, 2008*, Governance Studies at Brookings, 2008.

In its 2008 e-Government Survey, the United Nations reported similar progress. "The world average of the global e-government index continues to increase as more countries invest resources in developing websites that are informative. Most countries have e-information on policies, laws and an archive section on their portals/websites". [10] The Survey found that 98% of the 192 governments examined had institutional websites. It also showed that the majority of the countries surveyed were beginning to enter a more advanced phase of e-government and were adding more e-services and e-applications to respond to the needs of their citizens.

These findings on e-government mirror those on e-parliament. In 2007, 95% of the parliaments that responded to the first survey launched by the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament[11] reported that they had websites with parliamentary documents and actions available to the public. The results of the 2009 survey place the figure at 97% and suggest that several parliaments have made considerable progress in achieving high levels of openness and transparency, leading to the possibility of greater accountability.

Studies and reports from individual countries provide additional insights into how ICT are having an impact on the relationship between citizens and their governing institutions. A 2009 OECD study documented the substantial progress made by Portugal in transforming its public sector and its service delivery to the benefit of citizens and businesses.

> "By targeted use of e-government, Portugal is in the process of making citizens' and businesses' everyday life easier through administrative simplification supported by an increasing number of coherent and integrated services accessible online. Achieving a simpler public sector more responsive to demands from citizens and businesses requires strong political commitment and drive for achieving administrative simplification and e-government goals. Among its achievements,… [is that]… the time taken to register a company… has been reduced from 54 days to under 48 minutes". [12]

An example of encouraging citizen engagement in the policy setting process was identified in the legal framework of Estonia.

> "In recent years, a systematic approach has been taken by the central government related to enhancing public participation in policymaking. The latter is obviously interrelated with the growth of civil society, voicing strongly the ideals of participatory democracy. An important foundation for e-democracy was established by the Public Information Act at the beginning of 2001. The act obliged all public institutions to create websites and to provide extensive online content of public interest, including drafts of policy documents and legislative acts. Providing information about activities of public institutions is an important prerequisite of transparent and accountable government.
>
> Several important processes for democratic development have stemmed from the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept approved by Parliament in 2002. It is a strategic document defining the mutually complementary roles, mechanisms and priorities of public administration and civic initiative. In 2005, a Code of Good Practice on Involvement was developed by representatives of public sector and civil society organizations, elaborating the key principles that support active and meaningful participation of CSOs and the wider public. The code suggests principles that should be incorporated into the policy planning process". [13]

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10 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *UN e-Government Survey 2008: From e-Government to Connected Governance*, New York: United Nations, 2008, p.19 [http://www.unpan.org].

11 United Nations, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, *World e-Parliament Report 2008*, [New York]: United Nations, 2008 [http://www.ictparliament.org].

12 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Making Life Easy for Citizens and Businesses in Portugal: Administrative Simplification and e-Government*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2009.

13 Hinsberg, Hille, "My better Estonia", in U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services and Communications, Centre for Intergovernmental Solutions, *Engaging Citizens in Government* - Intergovernmental Solutions Newsletter Issue 25, Fall 2009, pp. 20-21.

Despite the positive outcomes reported in these studies and country reports, progress in many instances has been uneven, even among high income countries that have achieved positive results in many of their e-government initiatives. West[14] finds that several factors, including institutional arrangements, budget scarcity, group conflict, cultural norms, and prevailing patterns of social and political behavior can restrict or impede government actions, which in turn limit the transformational potential of the Internet and weaken the ability of technology to empower citizens. He stresses the need for government websites to make better use of available technology and address problems of access and democratic outreach.

A primary conclusion from the *World e-Parliament Report 2008* depicted a similar situation. While some parliaments were clearly innovators in their use of ICT, including by using them to connect with the electorate, for most parliaments there was a substantial gap between what was possible with ICT and what had been accomplished. Their use of ICT was best described as uneven.

RESPONDING TO CITIZENS' PRESSURE FOR GREATER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Today, the advances made by some governments and parliaments in using ICT, the expansion of mobile and fixed connectivity and the release of new devices, coupled with the activism of people on social networks, have led to greater expectations for participation among many citizens.

The extent to which these expectations are met will vary among countries and will depend mainly on non-technical factors, particularly vision, policies, leadership, political commitment, and the civic culture of the community. Other conditions, such as the economic climate or the enactment of appropriate policies and regulatory frameworks will also have a substantial effect.

The advances of ICT alone will never be sufficient to transform the quality of the political life of a society. Many countries have demonstrated that improved services and more open institutions can result from the effective deployment of technology. But achieving a more inclusive dialogue and governance process requires a combination of both public policies and laws promoting a more equitable and people-centred Information Society and the use of ICT instruments as a means to engage citizens in the policy process.

Some countries have already moved forward with the formulation of specific policies that ensure more opportunities for citizen engagement and greater openness, transparency, and accountability. Some of these efforts have originated with the executive through their e-government programmes; others have originated with legislatures as they evolve into e-parliaments.

Among the top 10 countries assessed by the most recent United Nations e-Government Survey,[15] the policy approaches announced by the United Kingdom and Spain well illustrate the ways in which some governments are enhancing their e-government programmes.

A multi-year plan outlined recently by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom includes actions in a number of areas. In his presentation of the initiative, the Prime Minister stressed how "People have rising expectations and aspirations. They want a bigger say and greater accountability in the public sector with services that are universal but also personal and of the highest quality".

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14 West, D.M., *Op cit.* p. 2.
15 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *UN e-Government Survey 2010: Leveraging e-Government at a Time of Financial and Economic Crisis*, New York: United Nations, 2010 [http://www.unpan.org].

The Prime Minister also emphasized several of the key issues of e-government and e-participation, and the critical role of information to achieve the next transformation of services:

> "Information is the key. An informed citizen is a powerful citizen. We will ensure that people can get access to the information they need to engage in dialogue with public service professionals; and in doing so reduce bureaucratic burdens. This will drive improvements in public services, making them more personal and cost-effective, whilst at the same time strengthening democratic deliberation and giving frontline workers and voluntary organisations the freedom to innovate and respond to new demands in new ways. We are determined to be among the first governments in the world to open up public information in a way that is far more accessible to the general public".

Finally, to ensure access of services to all citizens, the Prime Minister addressed the plans to reduce the digital divide.

> "But in order to achieve our ambitions for this third generation of public services we must ensure that no one in Britain is left behind in this communications revolution. So we will ensure that everyone can use all the facilities that will be available. Through our programme for Digital Britain - high speed broadband will be extended to every home so that we can create genuinely interactive services. There are now 6,000 public places with Internet access in England, including every library - where there are more than 30,000 terminals - many community and adult education centres; and even some pubs. And today I can announce that we will invest a further £30 million with UK Online, championed by [the] digital inclusion taskforce, to get at least another 1 million people online by 2012".[16]

Recent directives from the government of Spain provide another example of how some countries are taking specific steps to ensure access to e-government services. In 2009 the Spanish Council of Ministers approved a Royal Decree whose purpose is to partially implement the Law on Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services of 2007. The relevant decree (Real Decreto 1671/2009) was published in the Official Gazette of 18 November 2009. The press release describing this recent effort summarized the new regulations as follows:

> "The Law on Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services (otherwise known as the 'Law on eAdministration') seeks to make the most of information and communication technology (ICT) in an aim to bring citizens closer to the Public Administration while enhancing the transparency and efficiency of the relevant administrative proceedings, so as to enable the citizens' electronic access to most of the public services via the Internet.
>
> The same law officially recognises the right of citizens to communicate electronically with Public Administrations, i.e. to conduct their administrative business by electronic means, 24 hours a day.
>
> Relevant State bodies are obliged to facilitate this via diverse channels such as the Internet, television or other technology. This new right is to be respected by all Public Administrations from 31 December 2009 onwards. Furthermore, this law stipulates that any business conducted by electronic means will be just as valid as if it were conducted by traditional means". [17]

Among the common goals articulated in the policies of these executives are: wider access to information; increased opportunities for citizen engagement; and, reduction of the digital divide.

Parliaments have also put significant emphasis on these goals. But because of their constitutional role as the primary representatives of the people, there is an even greater requirement and a greater challenge to provide effective ways to engage citizens in the policy making process.

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16 Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, *Speech on Smarter Government*, London, 7 December 2009 [http://www.number10.gov.uk].
17 *Adoption of a decree for the implementation of the eGovernment Act* [http://www.epractice.eu/en/news/299507].

As the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives emphasized in her opening speech at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, "…technology provides opportunities for discussion and engagement; it strengthens accountability; ultimately it makes democracies more democratic".[18] Examples from three parliaments illustrate the commitment to these goals by legislatures in different regions of the world.

The Parliament of the Dominican Republic has coordinated with the executive the implementation of a new legal framework that promotes openness and transparency and increases citizen participation. The success of this new framework is demonstrated by some key indicators, including: a) growth in teledensity, resulting in almost 100% of the population having some type of modern telecommunications devices; b) a tripling of Internet subscribers; c) a substantial increase in broadband users; and, 4) an increasing number of mobile Internet users. Collectively these efforts have helped to reduce the digital divide in the country.

In his intervention at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009 the President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Dominican Republic[19] underscored that in his country access to information is a fundamental right, as outlined in the recently enacted Freedom of Information Act. This policy has guided the adoption of a plan for e-parliament. The pillars of this plan include greater efficiency and productivity, improved quality of legislation, better parliament-to-citizens interaction, and greater service to constituents. Transparency is seen as the critical and crosscutting value in connecting all of these pillars, and the Parliament's website plays a key role in achieving that purpose.

The Parliament also believes that before demanding transparency of others it has to be transparent itself. As a result, documents such as its budget, fees paid, and public statements of members are now online; all parliamentary procurements are done through the Internet and all contracts are online; all votes are now validated through a biometric system and made available electronically; and, technology allows the Parliament to respond to 90% of citizens' requests for information within 24 hours.

The President of the Chamber of the Dominican Republic also reported that ICT have helped to improve representation and citizen engagement. Citizens now participate in policy discussions via ICT, and studies conducted by the parliamentary administration have shown an increase in public satisfaction with the legislature.

The vision of the Parliament of Sweden (the Riksdagen)[20] is to make the work of Parliament transparent to the public, and create opportunities for enhanced engagement in, and greater understanding of, the legislative process. The principles of freedom of information and of expression underpin this vision.

The Riksdagen uses all the available tools, including modern technologies, to be open to the public. It places great importance on achieving an Information Society for all so that there are more opportunities for all segments of the society in their diversity to participate in the legislative process. ICT facilitate the internal work of the legislature, but it is equally crucial that this be linked to transparency, enabling the public to understand and follow the legislative process.

The Riksdagen has also reached out to constituencies by conducting regional surveys and establishing panels for citizens to give their views on how best to communicate with the parliament.

18 Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Opening speech, World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].
19 Julio César Valentín, President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Dominican Republic, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].
20 Anders Forsberg, Secretary General of the Parliament of Sweden, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org] .

The South African Parliament[21] has approved a five-year strategy for ICT - *From e-Parliament to e-Democracy* - that aims to deepen and strengthen the culture of popular participation and activism in parliamentary democracy. During the period 2009 – 2014 the Parliament is undertaking a number of projects in support of this strategy, including building an interactive website, establishing interactive Facebook-style pages, and exploiting mobile applications, multi-media services, and web-based TV. The strategy puts a great deal of emphasis on participation by members of parliament and by citizens. A first report on the strategy has been tabled in Parliament, and some issues have already been taken up with the executive. The Parliament will also make incremental investments in the next four years in systems for acquiring, managing, and sharing information; for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the government and its programs; and for increasing opportunities for public engagement. The vision also includes more exchanges and cooperation with other parliaments and parliamentary networks at the international level.

In addition to initiatives led by legislative bodies, notable developments have occurred in the non-profit sector in different countries. As noted by Brandtzæg and Lüders:

> "Today, «all» citizens can in principle produce and share information among themselves. The underlying premises of information dissemination have been turned upside down. Citizens themselves can play a role in determining the flow of information, which is the principle from which we derive the term eCitizen2.0."….

> "The definition of an eCitizen2.0 is one who produces and shares public-sector information with others via the Internet. The authorities must dare to undertake a fundamental rethink of the mechanisms used to distribute public-sector information and services. The public sector and eGov need to a greater extent to take as their point of departure the fact that the ordinary citizen is capable of acting as a «supplier» of public-sector information and communication". [22]

A number of initiatives currently under way in a few countries point in that direction. Alternatives to parliament-run online platforms have been developed by non-governmental organizations to provide citizens with additional instruments to scrutinize the parliamentary environment. Significant examples include Australia (*OpenAustralia.org*), France *(NosDeputes.fr)*, Italy (*OpenParlamento.it)*, United Kingdom (*TheyWorkForYou.com*) and the United States *(OpenCongress.org)*. These websites, which often rely on the work of volunteers, have attracted the public's interest by combining new methods of representing and retrieving information with social networking layers that support civic engagement.

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THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Advances in technology are continuing unabated, as outlined by the International Telecommunication Union in its recent report *Measuring the Information Society 2010[23]*. The latest results show that between 2007 and 2008, all 159 countries surveyed improved their Information Development Index (IDI) scores, confirming the ongoing diffusion of ICT and the overall transition to a global Information Society.

At the same time significant barriers remain in all countries, regardless of their income levels. These obstacles keep many citizens from being fully informed and actively engaged, if they choose to be, in the political and policy setting process.

21 Mninwa J. Mahlangu, Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces of South Africa, and, Mzi Mbangula, Divisional Head, Corporate Services (ICT), National Assembly of South Africa. Presentations at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].

22 Brandtzæg, Petter Bae - Lüders, Marika, *eCitizen 2.0: The Ordinary Citizen as a Supplier of Public Sector Information,* SINTEF, 2009 [http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/FAD/Vedlegg/IKT-politikk/eCitizen20.pdf].

23 International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society: the ICT Development Index,* Geneva: International Telecommunication Union, 2009 [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2009/index.html].

It is a fundamental challenge of the parliament to ensure that these barriers come down to provide all citizens with the opportunity to engage with the legislature and interact with a transparent, accessible, and accountable representative institution. It is the responsibility of the parliament to establish policies and frameworks that build an open and inclusive Information Society within which citizens have the means for participation.

Different forms of digital divide

Addressing the digital divide remains high on the agenda of national and international policy makers and there are promising signs of progress in this area. An analysis by the International Telecommunication Union of four groups of countries reflecting high, upper, medium, and low IDI levels based on data from 2002 to 2008 shows that the digital divide between the "high" group and each of the other three groups is shrinking.

Mobile cellular penetration in developing countries has more than doubled since 2005, passing the 50 per cent mark and reaching an estimated 57 per 100 inhabitants at the end of 2009. Even though this is well below the average in developed countries, where penetration exceeds 100 per cent, the rate of progress remains remarkable.

Compared to mobile cellular and fixed telephone services, fixed broadband services showed the largest price fall (42%) over this timeframe. However, the percentage of Internet users in developed countries (64%) remains much higher than in the developing world (18%), where four out of five people are still excluded from the benefits of being online.

Despite the seriousness of the gap that still exists, these trends, along with the increased sophistication of mobile devices, provide strong indications that even in developing countries citizens increasingly have access to technologies that can provide them with online information and the capacity to engage with their representatives and parliaments interactively. Legislatures should capitalize on these advances by exploring innovative ways to reach out to their constituencies through mobile technology.

The digital divide, however, goes beyond access to hardware and communications links. Barriers can take many forms, both across and within countries. For example, there still exist wide generational and educational divides between those who are capable of generating information and knowledge using web-based tools and the Internet and those who are not. Barriers also exist for the one-tenth of the world's population with disabilities and for people whose languages are not adequately represented on the Internet. And even in developed economies there are still large underserved areas that have not been reached by broadband services.

The paradox of too much information

User generated content has been hailed as one of the great advances of the Web 2.0 era. However, it has also become more and more difficult for many users to find the most relevant and authoritative information they need amidst the growing volume of available material online.

Similarly, as parliaments work to improve transparency by making their documents available, users can be easily overwhelmed and quickly frustrated as they try to find the most useful description of a bill or understand its likely impact. It is becoming increasingly evident that while

providing all relevant documents and information may be necessary for achieving the goal of parliamentary transparency, it is not sufficient for attaining the goal of civic understanding. Although many parliaments have done a good job making their documents available, what citizens often need even more is an objective summary of the most important issues and a better awareness of the legislative process.

Knowing what works

A fundamental challenge for parliaments is identifying the most effective techniques for fostering participation and how to best employ them. Exchanging experiences among parliaments can be beneficial, but more scientific analyses are also needed. An example is a study published in 2009 which provides a number of informative results.[24]

In the United States it is a common practice for members to visit their constituencies on a regular basis, sometimes as often as weekly. A variety of modalities are used to carry out these meetings, including one called the "town hall meeting", which is open to all constituents. At these sessions members typically talk about what is happening in Congress – what bills are being considered, what oversight or scrutiny is being carried out – and give their views on the major policy issues under debate. Constituents ask questions and are invited to express their opinions to the members.

Technology has enabled a new form of these gatherings, now called tele-town hall meetings. In these meetings, the member speaks by phone from anywhere, rather than having to travel back to the constituency. Citizens dial into a central number where they can listen to the discussion and also ask questions, which are normally pre-screened. Due to the low cost of telephone communication in the United States, it is an inexpensive and effective way for members to interact with a large number of constituents at the same time.

The study evaluated 20 tele-town hall meetings, which included 600 participants discussing a single issue – immigration policy. The analysis compared the participant groups with "control groups" that consisted of people who had expressed interest in the meetings, but who were precluded from taking part in them. Three interviews were later conducted with each group – one before and two following the meeting.

Of special interest for parliaments were the following three findings:

1. The tele-town hall meetings attracted a diverse array of constituents. Participants were from groups usually less engaged in politics or frustrated with the political system. Participation was higher among young people, minorities, women, and those in the lower income brackets;

2. Participants showed increased engagement in politics compared to the control group. Following the meeting they were more likely to vote and more likely to attempt to engage others in discussing the issues; and

3. The meetings were popular with constituents. 95% expressed the willingness to participate in future events.

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24 Congressional Management Foundation, *Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century,* Washington, D.C.: Congressional Management Foundation, 2009 [http://www.cmfweb.org].

As more studies of this nature are conducted, parliaments will be able to determine the benefits and limitations of various approaches to enhancing citizen engagement. Parliaments should encourage academic institutions and civil society organizations to undertake independent analyses that will contribute to more successful and cost-effective implementation of new technologies for interacting with the public.

Risks to democratic dialogue

Despite the many positive aspects of the Internet, its openness provides the means for disaffected individuals or groups that are present in every society to carry out activities intended to undermine democratic institutions. Observers have pointed out with concern that the Internet enables extremists to voice their positions on a large platform that provides them with the means potentially to overwhelm those supporting moderation and persuasion, which are essential to democracy. As noted at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, "demagogues can abuse the organizing capabilities of the Internet through the pretense of participatory politics".[25] Perhaps the most threatening example of this darker side of the Internet is the ability of terrorist groups to use it for recruitment and fomenting violence.

While actions can range from the annoying to the misleading, and even produce destructive behaviors, they present particularly difficult issues for democracies, which place a high value on freedom of expression in all forms of communication. These issues will demand greater attention as more parliaments adopt openness, transparency, and participation as fundamental goals of democratic governance.

In responding to these concerns parliaments and legislators will have to work together to develop best practices based on shared experiences and findings from scholarly studies. Leveraging the advantages of ICT to advance parliamentary democracy through greater transparency and citizen engagement will be more beneficial than trying to control access to communications tools or suppress freedom of expression on the Internet. To attempt this would not only be un-democratic, but would probably not be successful.

Costs and opportunities

Even as parliaments gain more understanding about how to employ ICT most effectively, the costs remain a challenge for all parliaments. On the positive side, the continuous and rapid improvement and diffusion of technologies create opportunities for legislatures that have little or no technology in place. By "starting from scratch", as described by the Vice President of the Assembly of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia[26], young and emerging democracies can use the latest developments in ICT, explore less expensive alternatives, and benefit from the experiences of others. Often, they can develop systems without having to support and maintain older legacy systems. And if they are willing, they can benefit from collaborative projects.

While learning from others and having access to newer and less expensive technology offer parliaments a number of ways to reduce costs, it is important to underscore that building the technical infrastructure necessary to become an e-parliament still requires a sustained commitment of resources. It takes a robust, comprehensive technical infrastructure to support all of parliament's fundamental activities, but most importantly the political and institutional will to do so.

25 Maurizio Lupi, Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].
26 Jani Makraduli, Vice President of the Assembly of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].

Political, social and cultural differences

It is important to note that significant differences in culture will affect how parliaments respond to the challenges that technology and the Information Society pose. History, the maturity of political institutions, demographics, the extent of the development of the Information Society, and especially citizens' views and expectations about their relationship to their government and their parliament will all have an influence. Equally important are the parliamentary traditions and procedures, the role of the parliament within the country's governance system, and the attitudes of the members themselves that will affect how a given parliament responds. If members want an open, transparent, and accountable legislature that actively engages citizens and seeks their views on policies, then this is much more likely to happen. If, on the other hand, they see themselves as an elite who, once elected, is less accountable to its constituents than to other political entities, such as a political party or even the executive, then citizens will not become involved.

The nature and degree of independence of the parliament is also a key factor. If the legislature can substantively modify proposed legislation before approving it, if it sets its own priorities, and if it determines and controls its own budget, the results will be very different than if these conditions are not present.

Finally, the social nature of the community of citizens can also make a great difference. This can be seen in the successful efforts in Ghana and South Africa to establish local centers where citizens can gather and have access to shared technology that connects them to the parliament, the government, and other communities in the country. Libraries are important social centers in many countries and these can also become places for citizens to participate in the Information Society. Customs vary among countries, but the opportunities afforded by shared technology resources can help to address many of the challenges faced by parliaments.

E-PARLIAMENT AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

During the World e-Parliament Conferences 2008 and 2009, Speakers, Presidents and legislators all emphasized the importance of maintaining the parliament's key role in national governance systems as countries transition to a global Information Society. As it was noted, "parliament at its best embodies the distinctive attributes of democracy – discussion and compromise – and it is the means through which public interest is realized".[27] "How can we translate the values of democratic deliberation into the practice of participatory politics on the Internet and through the Internet? These values are: 1) open, informed, transparent debate between persons with different and alternative visions of what constitutes the common good; 2) respect for generally accepted rules that are valid for all; 3) the legitimacy of decisions based on an understanding and acceptance of their contents by their recipients; and, 4) direct participation by men and women, at least at some point in the collective discussion and deliberations".[28] In addition, legislators underscored the fundamental responsibility of parliaments as guardians of critical democratic values in the environment of the Internet, where they may not always be honored.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union's broad framework for describing the contribution of parliaments to democracy[29] should continue to guide the policies and plans of legislatures for implementing

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27 Joyce Adeline Bamford-Addo, Speaker of the Parliament of Ghana, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org/]

28 Maurizio Lupi, Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, Presentation at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009, Washington, D.C. [http://www.ictparliament.org].

29 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Good Practic*e, Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006.

ICT. While the modalities for implementing them might need to adapt to society's technological evolution over the coming years, the basic values outlined in the framework set out the key characteristics of a democratic parliament. They include being:

- *representative:* that is, socially and politically representative of the diversity of the people, and ensuring equal opportunities and protections for all its members;
- *transparent:* that is, being open to the nation through different media, and transparent in the conduct of its business;
- *accessible:* this means involving the public, including the associations and movements of civil society, in the work of parliament;
- *accountable:* this involves members of parliament being accountable to the electorate for their performance in office and integrity of conduct; and
- *effective:* this means the effective organization of business in accordance with these democratic values, and the performance of parliament's legislative and oversight functions in a manner that serves the needs of the whole population.

The merits of using ICT as a means to achieve and sustain the achievement of these goals are evident. The degree and kinds of technology adoption undertaken by parliaments will be critical in determining their e-parliament levels (see Chapter 8).

As stated in the *World e-Parliament Report 2008*, the term e-parliament describes the institutional approach to the use of ICT. It is a concept that continues to evolve as innovative uses of technology are adopted by parliaments and as the global information society advances. However, in spite of the two years that have elapsed since the first Report, the definition first proposed in the 2008 document remains valid:

> "An e-parliament is a legislature that is empowered to be more open, transparent and accountable through ICT. It also empowers people, in all their diversity, to be more engaged in public life by providing higher quality information and greater access to documents and activities of the legislative body. An e-parliament is an efficient organization where stakeholders use information and communication technologies to perform their primary functions of lawmaking, representation, and oversight more effectively. Through the application of modern technology and standards and the adoption of supportive policies, an e-parliament fosters the development of an equitable and inclusive information society".[30]

It is too early to say to what extent new technologies and the challenges they pose truly portend a change in the nature of parliamentary democracy and the relationship between citizens and their political bodies. It is likely, however, that new approaches for perpetuating the values embodied in democratic institutions and the relationship between legislatures and citizens will emerge as the Information Society evolves over the next ten years. It is therefore clear that legislatures will have to continue to adapt to fulfil their deliberative role in a society in which technology increasingly provides the means for citizens and communities to engage in politics and civic activities. The chapters that follow consider some of the most important ways parliaments are striving to achieve this goal.

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30 United Nations, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, *World e-Parliament Report 2008*, [New York]: United Nations, 2008, p.12 [http://www.ictparliament.org].