

**Ethical Challenges of eDemocracy:
What Does Email Communication Mean to Parliamentarians in Europe?**

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Introduction

With the introduction of each major innovation in the history of information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as the telegraph, telephone, radio and television, there were new hopes and hypes about a change in politics. The same is applicable to the arrival of the internet. It seems that the prospect that the fast and wide spread of internet technologies could lead to the introduction of eDemocracy¹ makes this new medium far more exciting than any other type of ICTs. In this context, the relationship between the internet and the most important institution of a democracy, the parliament, and its members has become a topic for the public debate and is attracting ever more attention from both scholars and practitioners.

Whether or not one is subscribed to the notion of eDemocracy, the use of ICTs is already affecting the main areas of parliamentary functions such as general office operation (through office automation), campaigning (through electronic campaigning) and networking (by exploring the networking potential of internet technologies).² Regarding democratic participation in the age of growing voter apathy, there is general perception that ICTs have the potential to assist the parliament and its members to reconnect or better connect with the public they represent. A recent study shows that, although internet-based political participation is largely applicable to the well-educated and wealthy men, it is also offering a space to engage those who might not have been otherwise active.³ It is also argued that the cause of voter apathy is not because voters did not want to participate in politics but because current system of political representation is flawed and the interactive nature of internet technologies could help reinvigorate the democratic process.⁴ In order to achieve this, though, '[s]imply adding new electronic channels of communication to pre-existing structures or putting information online will not automatically produce a democratic nirvana'.⁵

Some are concerned that, for most citizens, 'the Internet has brought far more change to their relationship with their bank or various commercial outlets and to their social life than to their relationship with government.'⁶ Whilst using the internet as a source for various information is becoming ever more popular, a recent survey shows that, in

the UK, merely 6% internet users reported that they had used email to contact an MP or a councillor.⁷ An important question to ask here is why internet users are making so few email contacts with politicians. Is it because citizens are less interested in making use of internet technologies in the field of politics than in other fields of their life? Or is it because the other end of the citizen-government relationship is not as receptive and encouraging to citizen's interaction through internet technologies as one might assume? By focusing on parliamentarians' use of email, which is an important aspect of internet technologies, this paper aims to analyse how elected politicians consider the relevance of email to political communication, to what extent they are making use of it and what ethical issues are being raised.

In order to answer these questions, a variety of empirical data were gathered and used. These include, firstly, the results of a postal questionnaire survey during February-April 2005 covering all parliamentarians of the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish Parliament, with a total of 241 questionnaires completed and returned. Secondly, a survey of the official website of the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish Parliament was carried out to establish how many parliamentarians have publicised their email address(es) on their respective parliament website. Thirdly, a total of 40 face-to-face interviews have been conducted with parliamentarians and parliamentary staff during June-August 2005. Finally, three workshops with parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and parliamentarians' assistants were organised in March, May and June 2005.

In the next section, European parliamentarians' perceptions about email as a tool for political communication is analysed. This is followed by a reality check of how many parliamentarians have made their email address(es) available on the institutional website of the four case parliaments. The paper then moves onto discussing the use of emails by parliamentarians in the four case parliaments with a view to finding for what purposes these politicians use email communication and how they deal with received emails. The fourth section discusses the main ethical challenges faced by parliamentarians in Europe. Finally, the paper ends with a few concluding remarks.

The Political Impact of Email Communication: Parliamentarians' Perceptions

Compared to traditional ways of communication, such as letters and telephone, email communications have a number of advantages. For internet users, email communications are cost-effective and efficient—the transmission of emails is normally not constrained by time and space. Our questionnaire survey shows that the majority of elected politicians are convinced that email communications are important to parliamentary democracy.

First, emails serve as a convenient means of communication. Of the 225 parliamentarians who responded to the point about the convenience of email communications to deal with, about two thirds of them (149 or 66.2%) saw this as a 'most positive' or 'positive' advantage. Indeed, emails could be read or sent by a politician from any of his or her offices and even on the move (provided mobile devices such as personal digital assistants or PDAs are available). Information and documents could also be sent via email to and by a politician from anywhere. With the help of email, elected politicians are becoming less constrained by the geography of their multiple working sites. This is indeed the view of one of our interviewees:

[The internet is] indispensable. Without the internet I am not even able to communicate with my offices. ... Because I have like a virtual office, and that can only be established through the Net. And when I send out an email, I copy it always to all people in my office whether they are based here or in Valetta. We have constant communication. ... Internally we always have a group system, where we always copy the message to the group, every message, even if it is a simple yes or no reply to something, but at least you know what the other people are doing, and then particularly they know what I am saying and the instructions that I am giving.⁸

Second, in addition to being convenient for parliamentarians to deal with; emails are also an easy way of communication for the electorates. One parliamentarian believes that, 'in terms of communication, ... you can build up a database of email addresses in your constituency and you could send your communication... you could communicate

with a large number of people.’⁹ It is also the view of 72.6% of our 223 questionnaire respondents that ‘easy to use by constituents’ is another most positive or positive advantage of email communications.

Third, email communications can play a positive role in improving political participation among the younger generation at a time when liberal democracies are faced with the growing challenge of voter apathy. Our survey shows that more than half (53.2%) of the 222 parliamentarians who commented on the issue believed that another most positive or positive advantage of email communications is their potential to attract young people to communicate with elected politicians. One of our interviewees commented on the problem associated with the old generations of his party members who are less active in using email communication, compared to the younger generation:

The other problem we have with our membership here and our supporters is that the older generations at the moment are less likely to have an Internet email connection than maybe the younger generation, so in terms of our membership is not a good way of communicating with them.¹⁰

Although emails and posted letters are different forms of communication, the vast majority of parliamentarians participated in our study regarded the former just as important as the latter. To many parliamentarians, the importance of emails is comparable to posted letters in terms of serving the purpose of political communicating. Amongst the 240 parliamentarians who gave their view on the issue, more than 80% of them either totally agreed or agreed that emails are as important as letters for communication with constituents (83.3%), with the general public (82.1%) and with interest groups (87.1%). It is also true that there are parliamentarians who remain loyal to posted letters. One of them argued that ‘the effort to write a letter, and let’s say also to copy it and to sign it and to send it, it’s bigger, so people would write only very important things.’¹¹

Table 1. Advantages of emails

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Emails are convenient to deal with</i>			
Most positive advantage	115	51.1	51.1
Positive advantage	34	15.1	66.2
Fairly positive advantage	35	15.6	81.8
Least positive advantage	41	18.2	100.0
Total	225	100.0	
<i>Emails are easy to use by constituents</i>			
Most positive advantage	87	39.0	39.0
Positive advantage	75	33.6	72.6
Fairly positive advantage	34	15.2	87.9
Least positive advantage	27	12.1	100.0
Total	223	100.0	
<i>Emails can attract young people to communicate with politicians</i>			
Most positive advantage	64	28.8	28.8
Positive advantage	54	24.3	53.2
Fairly positive advantage	58	26.1	79.3
Least positive advantage	46	20.7	100.0
Total	222	100.0	

Despite that the majority of parliamentarians attach great importance to email communication, it is still too early to pronounce the death of posted letters as an important means of political communication, in particular, communication between elected parliamentarians and members of their own constituency. One British MP cautioned eDemocracy advocates with the following remarks:

A lot of people that I know have bought computers but they don't actually check their emails everyday. They may put their computers on once a week. Therefore an email isn't always an instant method of communication. For example, ... when I go back this afternoon I will be spending some time with my family, so it maybe won't be until tomorrow morning that I put my computer on. So the idea that you can send someone an email and get an immediate message to them only works if it's an office situation where computers are constantly on and people are watching it. ... If you are busy doing other things, then you don't get that email. And I know people who only put their computers on once every two weeks! When they first got their computers they were really very much into it but... many people who don't have broadband are rather disappointed by the speed of the Internet ... it's not the best way to communicate with them.¹²

It seems that parliamentarians' email as a new tool for political communication is contingent upon a number of factors: all parliamentarians have a very demanding diary each week and they can not be expected to deal with their incoming emails all the time; parliamentarians have a life to live off line; not every email user checks their emails on a regular basis; the speed of the internet connection can slow down the process of communication and, finally, the availability of computer and a link to the internet does not necessarily mean a politician online.

Table 2 Are emails as important as letters?

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>For communication with constituents</i>			
Totally agree	105	43.8	43.8
Agree	95	39.6	83.3
Disagree	28	11.7	95.0
Totally disagree	12	5.0	100.0
Total	240	100.0	
<i>For communication with members of general public</i>			
Totally agree	99	41.3	41.3
Agree	98	40.8	82.1
Disagree	33	13.8	95.8
Totally disagree	10	4.2	100.0
Total	240	100.0	
<i>For communication with interest groups</i>			
Totally agree	112	46.7	46.7
Agree	97	40.4	87.1
Disagree	24	10.0	97.1
Totally disagree	7	2.9	100.0
Total	240	100.0	

Should Email Addresses Go Public? Parliamentarians' Attitude

As a general trend of development, most parliaments in the EU member states have embarked upon a policy of making the internet a new tool to assist their members'

political communication since the late 1990s. It is indeed the case that, at the European level, strengthening political participation and democratic decision-making through the use of ICTs is one of the five major objectives of the i2010 eGovernment action plan. In tune with the new technological and policy environment, institutional support of email communications and ICT equipment has become a priority item for parliamentary budget in most European countries.

Although email is a relatively new tool for political communication, the provision of an official email address for each parliamentarian has already become a standard practice in most EU countries. This is confirmed by statistics published by the European Telework Development (ETD) which indicates that, by April 1999, virtually all parliamentarians from the 15 EU member states already had an email address, with the exception of Greece (where only 50 out of 300 parliamentarians had an email address), Italy (where 300 out of 630 parliamentarians had an email address) and Spain (for which data was not available).¹³

Universal provision of email address, however, does not necessarily mean that all parliamentarians are prepared to publicise their email address. In fact, some parliamentarians in Europe still remain unconvinced of the need to make their officially assigned email address available on their respective parliamentary website. This leads to the speculation that politicians and bureaucracies find eDemocracy disruptive and they do not want to engage with untried methods¹⁴

By analysing the institutional websites of the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish Parliaments, we found that the vast majority of parliamentarians in Europe have provided their email address(es) on the official parliament website. Swedish MPs scored the highest with 97.8% of them indicating their email contact details, followed by British MPs (82.4%). In comparison, 60.8% of MEPs provided email contact on the European Parliament's website. Portuguese MPs came last with just over half of them (52.8%) having provided email contact on the Portuguese Parliament website.

The relatively high proportion (47.2%) of Portuguese MPs without an email contact on the Parliament website may be explained by, firstly, the fact that Portugal has one of the lowest internet penetration rates among EU countries. Secondly, in Portugal, it is often the political groups, rather than individual MPs, whom voters would likely to contact. This means the level of incentive and pressure for publicising email address in Portugal is relatively lower than in other countries, such as the UK. Thirdly, Parliamentary budget in Portugal is allocated largely to political groups and individual MPs do not command much resource for hiring office staff to help with dealing with political communications, including emails.¹⁵

The significant proportion (39.2%) of MEPs without email contact does seem to be a matter of concern for a number of reasons. First of all, resource allocation at the European Parliament to individual MEPs can be said generous and each of them is well supported in terms of equipment and staffing.¹⁶ Secondly, MEPs need to work across at least three office sites: Brussels, Strasbourg and the home country constituency. This means there is a higher level of incentive for MEPs to promote email-based communication, which is free of constraint by physical geography. Apparently, the availability of resources and the need for efficient communication between different geographical sites have failed to bring all MEPs onto the bandwagon of eDemocracy.

Regarding the matter of whether email address should be published on the parliament website, the discretion is in left in the hands of individual parliamentarians, rather than the parliament. The British Parliament provides the following explanation about MPs' email links from the Parliament website:

Members have been asked to supply details of the preferred form of their names, titles and qualifications; these have been included in this list where known. Links to email and websites are also given where available. Where an email address is not available details of postal and telephone contact points are given.¹⁷

When asked whether parliamentarians in the UK are officially obliged to advertise their email address one of them said:

We are not officially advised to advertise any address [including email address]! I mean the only address that people can write to members of the parliament usually is the House of Commons. I mean, we have an address here which is freely available, but there's no official requirement to advertise any address.¹⁸

In an explanation about the availability of email addresses on its website the European Parliament states that 'Email addresses are given **only** [emphasis by the European Parliament] for those MEPs who wish them to be published'.¹⁹

For those parliamentarians who have provided email contact(s) on the parliament website there is a difference in the types of email addresses between parliaments. More specifically, the vast majority of Swedish parliamentarians were happy to promote their officially assigned email address with only one exception. In contrast, of the 52.8% Portuguese parliamentarians with email contact, only 2.6% adopted the official email address and the majority of them had their non-official email address published. MEPs' publishing of email address(es) is split between the officially assigned address (29.5%) and non-official ones (22.3%) with some MEPs using both (9%).

On the UK Parliament website, an email link has been created for 82.4% (or 532) of the 646 MPs. However, the email link is connected with a third party service provider,²⁰ rather than the MPs directly. In this case, details of the official email addresses are not shown on the parliament's website; instead, a hyperlink on the word 'email' takes visitors to a contact page where a message could be typed and submitted to the service provider, who diverts the email messages to the recipient MPs. This email transfer system 'does not permit users to send emails from "@parliament.uk" addresses' and correspondence by email 'is forwarded once a day to MPs'.²¹ The implications of this arrangement are two-fold. First, by adopting this system MPs have will not get instant (or real-time) communication offered by email systems—an

email message to an MP will take at least a day, instead of a split of seconds, to reach the destination. In the age of instant communication offered by email, UpMyStreet requests that users should telephone the House of Commons Switchboard on and ask for the their MP’s office, if they wish to contact their MP urgently.²² Second, emails to MPs through UpMyStreet have become indirect, rather than direct communication. In case a user forgot to type in his or her email address in an enquiry, the MP would not be able to reply back. In comparison, the email address of the sender would be automatically included in a message addressed directly to the MP’s email address.

Table 3. Official publication and types of email addresses by parliamentarians

Indication of Email Address	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>British Parliament</i>			
Yes	532	82.4	82.4
No	114	17.6	100.0
Total	646	100.0	
<i>European Parliament</i>			
Yes–official	216	29.5	29.5
Yes–non-official	163	22.3	51.8
Yes–both	66	9.0	60.8
None	287	39.2	100.0
Total	732	100.0	
<i>Portuguese Parliament</i>			
Yes–official	5	2.2	52.4
Yes–non-official	116	50.2	50.2
Yes–both	1	.4	52.8
None	109	47.2	100.0
Total	231	100.0	
<i>Swedish Parliament</i>			
Yes–official	355	97.5	97.5
Yes–non-official	1	.3	97.8
Yes–both	0	0	97.8
None	8	2.2	100.0
Total	364	100.0	

For users who do not know the precise email addresses of MPs and their office staff, UpMyStreet seems to be the only option for email communication with their parliamentary representative. This is in part because ‘the Parliamentary web site is not

able to forward any emails on to MPs or Peers’ and this ‘includes emails received by the House of Commons Information Office, the House of Lords Information Office and the Webmaster’.²³

eDemocracy in Practice: Parliamentarians’ Use of Email

Despite the fact that a fairly large number of parliamentarians at some parliaments have decided not to publish their email contact on their respective parliamentary website, most parliamentarians seem active in making use of online communication. The results of the questionnaire survey suggest that the vast majority of parliamentarians in Europe are already using email on a regular basis. Of the 237 parliamentarians who commented on the frequency of their use of email, 93.7% suggested they are ‘regular’ users and only 3 parliamentarians (1.3%) said they do not use email at all.

Table 4. How often do parliamentarians use email?

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Do not use it	3	1.3	1.3
Rare use	1	.4	1.7
Occasional use	11	4.6	6.3
Regular use	222	93.7	100.0
Total	237	100.0	

When asked about their use of the internet, the majority of our parliamentary respondents confirmed that emails are already used in a number of important areas of political communication. More specifically, in response to the question ‘To what extent do you use the Internet to communicate with other parliamentarians’, 71.8% regarded themselves as ‘regular’ users. At a slightly lower rate, 64.1% of our parliamentary respondents regarded themselves as ‘regular’ users of the internet in communicating with their political party. Meanwhile, 66.4% considered themselves as ‘regular’ users of the internet in communicating with their constituents.

The point that most parliamentarians use email to communicate on a regular basis is confirmed by one of our interviewees: ‘We use email all the time for internal communication both within the parliament and within the party. In fact, you do not send letters to people in the party unless there’s some political reason for doing it.’²⁴

Table 5. The internet as a political communications tool for parliamentarians

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>To what extent do you use the internet to communicate with other parliamentarians?</i>			
Do not use	11	4.7	4.7
Rare use	7	3.0	7.7
Occasional use	48	20.5	28.2
Regular use	168	71.8	100.0
Total	234	100.0	
<i>To what extent do you use the internet to communicate with your party?</i>			
Do not use	11	4.7	4.7
Rare use	19	8.2	12.9
Occasional use	60	25.8	38.6
Regular use	143	61.4	100.0
Total	233	100.0	
<i>To what extent do you use the Internet to communicate with constituents?</i>			
Do not use	9	3.8	3.8
Rare use	12	5.0	8.8
Occasional use	59	24.8	33.6
Regular use	158	66.4	100.0
Total	238	100.0	

Given that most parliamentarians claim themselves to be active users of electronic communication, do citizens necessarily benefit from the many advantages that email offers?

Speed of email communication. Among the 223 parliamentarians who responded the question of how many of the received emails are answered immediately, only a small number of them (14 or 6.3%) said most (between 76-100%) of the emails received were answered immediately. In comparison, nearly half (106 or 47.5%) of the

parliamentarian respondents could only manage to answer immediately a small proportion (between 0-25%) of the received emails. The majority (74%) of our parliamentarian respondents estimated that no more than 50% (between the range 0-50%) of their received emails got answered immediately.

It seems that by adopting email communication some people would naturally expect an instant reply from their elected parliamentarians to their message. This, however, would require a change to parliamentary policies. When parliamentarians deal with an email in the same way they deal with a letter coming through the post, a reply to the email might go through the same process that a written reply to a letter takes. Those who expect instant replies to their emails could well be disappointed by the reality:

While maybe we are working on a four day cycle, getting a letter, sending, replying, we have a target of four days, sometimes we can do it in one or two days... With email, people expect instant reply, and that isn't always easy to do, particularly if someone sends me an email with ten questions, which would probably take me half a day to look for the answers! ... It's easy to send an email, therefore you tend to get some questions which possibly people wouldn't have taken the trouble to sit down and write on a letter to you.²⁵

The view of the British MP was echoed by an MEP, who suggested that the use of email has created an illusion about the speed of parliamentary communication:

Because the Internet is a very fast medium, so everyone who is entering your webpage expects an answer in hours or minutes or something like that... but parliamentarian work is also something different: you have to go to commissions, to meetings, to national assemblies, to presentations, and so on and so on, which means that you are not always in the office sitting here and answering questions that come in from the internet. So the problem is that there is some illusion created...²⁶

The gap between email senders and the reality of snail mail speed replies is an important one and it could have implications for the consideration of other benefits that emails are perceived to have. For instance, if emails from young people to

parliamentarians do get replied instantly, would emails still help attract young people to communicate with their elected politicians?

Table 6. Parliamentarians and their received emails

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Of received emails, how many are answered immediately?</i>			
0-25%	106	47.5	47.5
26-50%	59	26.5	74.0
51-75%	44	19.7	93.7
76-100%	14	6.3	100.0
Total	223	100.0	
<i>Of received emails, how many are not answered?</i>			
0-25%	136	65.4	65.4
26-50%	42	20.2	85.6
51-75%	22	10.6	96.2
76-100%	8	3.8	100.0
Total	208	100.0	
<i>Of received emails, how many are answered personally?</i>			
0-25%	114	50.4	50.4
26-50%	58	25.7	76.1
51-75%	32	14.2	90.3
76-100%	22	9.7	100.0
Total	226	100.0	

Success rate of email communication. To the question of how many emails are not replied at all, 65% of the 208 respondents said up to a quarter (0-25%), 20.2% said between 26-50%, 10.6% said between 51-75% and another small group (3.8%) said more than three quarters (76-100%) of their received emails did not get an answer. These figures seem to confirm the concern of some eDemocracy advocates that even if we manage to get in the e-door, it is not guaranteed that we do not end up with making a trip to the digital dustbin inside the Congressional office.²⁷ Whilst parliamentarians might have legitimate reasons to delete certain categories of message, they do not seem to be adequately guided by any institutional policy and parliamentary code of conduct in their handling of emails. In the case of the UK, the Parliament does have its ‘Guidance for Emails’, by which the Parliament refuses to reply to emails if they:

- use bad or unacceptable language
- are significantly indecipherable
- try to sell or promote a product
- have been sent to multiple recipients
- are significantly beyond the remit of the Parliament website²⁸

Emails that fall within the above categories will be deleted without having received a reply. There is no indication that the same guidance is applicable to messages addressed to individual MPs, although UpMyStreet, the email transfer service provider has provided a hyperlink reference to these rules. In the meanwhile, the company warns that users may not receive a reply if they do not include a full address and postcode.

Parliamentarians' personal attention to email communication. In terms of who actually replies incoming emails, it seems that only a small proportion (9.7% or 22 out of 226) of our questionnaire respondents who commented on this issue indicated that they personally answer most (between 76-100%) of their received emails. In contrast, over half (50.4%) of our parliamentary respondents personally answer no more than a quarter (between 0-25%) of their received emails, despite the fact that most of the questionnaire respondents agreed that email are easy to deal with.

The fact that only a relatively small proportion of parliamentarians could manage to answer most of their incoming emails personally and immediately implies that the use of the internet as new communications tool does not necessarily help reduce the distance between elected politicians and citizens.

Ethical Challenges of Email Communications for Parliamentarians

In the absence of parliamentary policy and codes of conduct, parliamentarians in Europe are faced with a number of ethical challenges posed by email communication. Firstly, whilst they are versatile and convenient to use, email systems do not guarantee privacy of communication. The results of our questionnaire survey shows that 43.2% of parliamentarians held the view that email is not a secure tool for communication and the lack of privacy assurance constitutes one of the most significant or significant problems of email communication.

Table 7. Problems faced by parliamentarians in email communication with citizens

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Email is not a secure communication tool in terms of privacy</i>			
Most significant problem	40	17.6	17.6
Significant problem	58	25.6	43.2
Fairly significant problem	63	27.8	70.9
Least significant problem	66	29.1	100.0
Total	227	100.0	
<i>Not always possible to prove email sender is a constituent</i>			
Most significant problem	35	15.4	15.4
Significant problem	73	32.0	47.4
Fairly significant problem	63	27.6	75.0
Least significant problem	57	25.0	100.0
Total	228	100.0	
<i>Not always possible to produce signatures or attach official documents via email</i>			
Most significant problem	34	15.1	15.1
Significant problem	68	30.2	45.3
Fairly significant problem	48	21.3	66.7
Least significant problem	75	33.3	100.0
Total	225	100.0	
<i>You receive so many emails that it is not possible to deal with them all</i>			
Most significant problem	123	53.7	53.7
Significant problem	35	15.3	69.0
Fairly significant problem	25	10.9	79.9
Least significant problem	46	20.1	100.0
Total	229	100.0	

Secondly, it is not always possible for the recipient to identify who the email sender was. A large proportion (47.4%) of parliamentarians rated difficulties in ascertaining the identity of the sender as a most significant or significant problem of email communication. For parliamentarians, they need to be sure whether or not the email sender is a member of his or her own constituency before a reply is considered. Many email addresses, such as those free ones offered by Microsoft's Hotmail, Yahoo! Mail and Google's Gmail services, do not provide much indication about the institutional and geographical belonging of the address bearer. During interviews we were told that parliamentarians and their office staff often needed to ask the email sender to provide their full address including post code before they consider a proper reply to the message.

Moreover, when using email to communicate it is often difficult to produce a personal signature or attach official documents. This implies that emails have not reached the stage to render traditional ways of communication, such as letters, obsolete. A high proportion (45.3%) of parliamentarians regarded the inability of emails to carry a personal signature by the MP or attach an official document as a most significant or significant problem.

Finally, parliamentarians are becoming increasingly concerned with the issue of email overloading. In line with the rapid growth in the use of the internet by the general public, elected politicians are also faced with the growing challenge of email overloading. It is not surprising that 69% of the 229 valid respondents considered the situation in which they could not deal with all the emails addressed to them as a problem of being most significant or significant. Regarding the average number of emails they receive per day, 27.3% of the 238 valid respondents estimated that they receive 51 to 75 messages; 22.7% receive 76-100 messages and another 15.5% receive over 100 messages. In other words, over two thirds (65.5% combined) of our respondents get more than 50 email messages on average per day. Faced with the problem of email overloading one MEP was loathed to think that 'if I really would try to answer all my mails I would seat here every night up to 2, 3 or 4 in the morning.'²⁹

Table 8. Average number of emails received by Parliamentarians per day

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0 / Do not use email	2	.8	.8
1 to 25	36	15.1	16.0
26 to 50	44	18.5	34.5
51 to 75	65	27.3	61.8
76 to 100	54	22.7	84.5
Over 100	37	15.5	100.0
Total	238	100.0	

Among the large number of emails sent to parliamentarians there are surely legitimate ones generated from, for example, parliamentarians' own political party/group, government agencies, constituency and intra-parliamentary communications. There are, however, also emails that are not relevant to parliamentarians' interest and responsibilities and these messages seem to make a significant contribution to the problem of email overloading.

Amongst the 224 parliamentarians who rated the relevance of their received emails, some (11 or 4.9%) suggested that between 76-100% of the messages sent to them were irrelevant or spam; 45 (or 20.1%) of them said 51-75% of their incoming messages are of this nature; 85 (or 37.9%) of them thought 26-50% of their messages belonged to this category. Combined, nearly two thirds of the parliamentarian respondents (62.9%) said over a quarter of their incoming emails were either spam or irrelevant to their role as an elected politician. Spam was also one of the most frequently mentioned problems during our face-to-face interviews with parliamentarians. Spam help fill up parliamentarians' email inbox and it is time-consuming to identify and delete them.

Table 9. Proportion of received emails that are irrelevant or spam

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-25%	83	37.1	37.1
26-50%	85	37.9	75.0
51-75%	45	20.1	95.1
76-100%	11	4.9	100.0
Total	224	100.0	

In addition to their dislike of spam, some parliamentarians believe the use of email to communicate tends to encourage more correspondence to be generated compared to traditional ways of communication. In the words of one parliamentary email communication could have a ‘ping-pang’ effect: ‘whilst I will occasionally reply an email by sending an email back, ... then you get into the problem of ping-pang, because you send a reply, they send you another reply!’³⁰

Because of the multiple dilemmas faced by parliamentary email users, it is unlikely that email will replace posted letters in any time soon. For some parliamentarians, ‘I would much rather receive letters from constituents than emails, and we’ve decided in the majority cases that if we get an email then we will print off the email and send an official written reply.’³¹ If legitimate email enquiries get printed and then replied by letter through the post, what is the point of sending out emails in the first place! For the time being, there is also an institutional factor, which still favours traditional modes of communication:

Under this sort of system that we operate it is really a system geared up to letters, and it is easier to organise. For example at the moment all my London correspondence is being forwarded to my home address. Everyday we get a pack with the mail. And that’s reasonably easy to organise. Emails are easy to lose, to be honest. You can delete them by mistake. You can see something and not recognise who it is and delete it by mistake. You do not tear up letters by mistake. You always open letters. So in most cases we would encourage people to communicate by letter. ... We get an awful lot more [of] mail. ... And therefore you need a system in place to deal with that. The thing is that the system that we have setup at the moment is one that deals with letters, so what happens is that an email will get printed off and put into the queue and almost certainly we will send a written reply, with a signature on the letter rather than just an email reply.³²

Unquestionably, traditional post is a well-established, familiar, tried and trusted mode of communication. In comparison, email communication is new, less familiar to people who are not used read and write on the screen and potentially more vulnerable to human errors. Within the context of the current parliamentary communication system, cautious politicians would think twice before they whole-heartedly embrace

the email revolution at the expense of the old post. Until email communication is supported by an institutional system that is comparable with, if not more sophisticated than, the traditional setup for postal communications, the development of parliamentary eDemocracy will perhaps remains a project of the future.

Conclusion

The data and discussions presented in this paper showed that the vast majority of parliamentarians in the four case study parliaments, including the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish Parliaments, had a positive view about the potential of email communication for enhancing parliamentary democracy in Europe. Most parliamentarians were convinced that emails are convenient to deal with by elected politicians; they are easy to use by constituency members; and emails can help attract the internet-savvy to communicate with politicians.

Although the advantages of email communication have prompted the majority of parliamentarians at the four case study parliaments to officially publicise their email contact details, there are still a significant number of parliamentarians who have decided not to reveal their email address(es) on their respective parliament website. In the absence of any institutional policy and codes of conduct to guide their members' publicity of email contact, all the parliaments covered by this study have left the discretion in the hands of parliamentarians.

Results of our research suggest that the mixed picture of email address publicity does not deny the fact that an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians considered themselves regular users of email—they use email frequently to communicate with other parliamentarians, with their party/political group and with their constituency, among others. An interesting point our data showed was that only a very low number of parliamentarians could manage to answer just a small proportion of their received emails in person. The expectation that email communication could offer instant,

interactive, and direct communication between the electorate and the elected remains largely an illusion.

Parliamentarians may be criticised for not making use of email at all or not making more use of it. However, they are faced with many challenges posed by email communication itself. The majority of parliamentarians believed that email systems do not offer enough protection of privacy. On the other hand, email communication often makes it difficult or impossible for a parliamentarian to make sure who he or she is communicating with. Parliamentarians are obliged to answer queries from a constituency member but they do not have to deal with emails from outside their own constituency. Therefore, it is important to be sure about the identity of the email sender. Meanwhile, emails, compared to letters, can not bear parliamentarians' personal signature, which is an important factor to making a parliamentarian's response more valued. Last but not least, email overloading has already become a major problem for parliamentarians. The burden created by email overloading is poised to offset the potential of email to become an effective and efficient tool for political communication. Being cautiously optimistic about the future of eDemocracy, one parliamentarian remarked, 'I do not know if we are yet prepared for eDemocracy. ... Not everybody is using the internet. But the number is increasing.'³³

Notes

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¹ The term eDemocracy means the application of new ICTs, in particular internet technologies, and their positive transformational impact in political systems processes. For a detailed discussion about the origin and issues related to the concept of eDemocracy, see Thierry Vedel (2006), 'The Idea of Electronic Democracy: Origins, Visions and Questions', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 226-235.

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- ⁹ Interview with British MP, Northeast England, 8 August 2005.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Interview with Austrian MEP at the European Parliament, Brussels, 28 June 2005.
- ¹² Interview with British MP, Northeast England, 8 August 2005.
- ¹³ European Telework Development (ETD) (1999), 'European Parliamentarians and the Internet', April, available at (accessed 25 May 2006): <http://www.eto.org.uk/eustats/parlimnt.htm>
- ¹⁴ Stephen Coleman and Donald F. Norris (2005), 'A New Agenda for e-Democracy', Forum Discussion Paper No. 4, January. Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, p. 24.
- ¹⁵ See Cristina Leston-Bandeira (2006), 'Impact of the Internet on Parliaments: Towards a Methodological Framework', paper presented at the Seventh Workshop of Parliamentary Scholars and Parliamentarians, Wroxton, 28-30 July.
- ¹⁶ Each MEP can have, for example up to four computers provided by the Parliament. For more details see Xiudian Dai (2006), 'Net Gain or Net Loss? The Internet as a Double-edged Sword for MEPs and the European Parliament', paper presented at the Seventh Workshop of Parliamentary Scholars and Parliamentarians, Wroxton, 28-30 July.
- ¹⁷ UK Parliament, 'Alphabetical List of Members of Parliament', <http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alms.cfm> (accessed 24 May 2006).
- ¹⁸ Interview with British MP, Northeast England, 8 August 2005.
- ¹⁹ European Parliament, 'Replies to Questions Already Put to the Webmaster', http://www.europarl.europa.eu/tools/faq/default_en.htm (accessed 26 May 2006).
- ²⁰ The third party service provider, at the time of writing, is UpMyStreet.com (www.upmystreet.com), which is part of uSwitch.com (www.uswitch.com), an online and phone based comparison and switching service company that provides price comparison on utilities, broadband and finance products in the UK.
- ²¹ UpMyStreet, <http://www.upmystreet.com/commons/email/1/256.html> (accessed 6 September 2006).
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- ²³ The UK Parliament (2005), 'Email Guidance Notes', 10 March, <http://www.parliament.uk/directories/emailguidance.cfm> (accessed 6 September 2006)
- ²⁴ Interview with British MP, Northeast England, 8 August 2005.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Interview with Austrian MEP at the European Parliament, Brussels, 28 June 2005.
- ²⁷ Steven Clift (2006), 'Share Your Views - Is the US Congress empowering the voice of independent e-citizens or throwing up the "Electronic Curtain" with e-mail changes', newswire@groups.dowire.org, 12 July.
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- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Interview with Hungarian MEP, European Parliament, Brussels, 28 June 2005