

Adoption of digital technology by Australasian and Other Westminster Parliaments

Queensland Parliamentary Library and Research Service
Level 6 Annexe
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Study Overview

- summarises the experience of 16 English speaking parliaments in Australia and overseas
- based upon the results of a survey of the adoption of digital technology originally conducted for the [Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia \(APLA\)](#) during 2010-11

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Good morning,

Today in my paper I would like to present a summary of the experience of 16 English speaking parliaments in Australia, and overseas (namely, New Zealand, the United Kingdom's House of Commons and House of Lords; Scotland; Canada).

The information in this paper:

- is based upon the results of a survey, in **questionnaire** form, of the adoption of digital technology originally conducted for the [Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia \(APLA\)](#) during 2010-11.
- These responses were **supplemented** by personal enquiry and empirical observation of parliamentary websites.
- The study itself was funded by a scholarship from the [Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia \(APLA\)](#). My home Library, now the Queensland Parliamentary Library and Research Service (QPLRS), was the host Library and the project had the support of both the Queensland Parliamentary Librarian and the Clerk of the Queensland Parliament who co-ordinated distribution of the questionnaire, utilising the ANZACATT server in the case of the Australian and New Zealand Parliaments.
- The questionnaire used was modelled in the first instance upon the survey template used by the Hansard Society for their 2009 study of the use of digital technology by Members of the United Kingdom's House of Commons (Andy Williamson, [MPs online: Connecting with constituents](#)). That survey format was adapted, with Dr Williamson's approval, for the purpose of this project so as to reflect an institutional perspective.

Key Issues

1. the pattern of spread of digital technology among the respondent parliaments
2. in particular, whether respondents had established a presence in the new world of social media
3. challenges and opportunities new digital technology presented for parliaments

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The key issues I wish to address today revolve around:

1. the pattern of spread of digital technology among the respondent parliaments, and
2. in particular, whether respondents had established a presence in the new world of social media.
3. I would also like to look at some of the challenges and opportunities new digital technology presents for parliaments, for instance:
 - What are parliaments doing to respond strategically to emerging technologies? (a challenge). Could parliaments be doing more to use online technologies to facilitate public participation? (an opportunity).

Before turning to these issues in more detail, firstly let's look at the technologies which were the subject of the survey and the parliaments which participated.

Which technologies?

- established technologies eg teleconferencing
- relatively new “Web 2.0” applications eg:
 - Twitter feeds and Facebook pages
 - RSS feeds
 - Blogs and wikis
 - Podcasts

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Technologies studied ranged from established technologies such as teleconferencing and webcasting (of parliamentary proceedings) through to relatively new “Web 2.0” applications including (but not limited to):

- social media such as **social networking** sites (eg Facebook) which allow users to construct online profiles and establish connections) or **microblogging** services (eg Twitter)

- **Content sharing** sites (such as YouTube and Flickr) which host and distribute user created or uploaded multimedia content (eg videos, photos)

- RSS feeds, social bookmarking, blogs, podcasts and wikis.

Key characteristics which define Web 2.0 technologies include **interactivity, information sharing and collaboration**, and the ability for **users** to actually **generate content and/or control its receipt**.

Many Web 2.0 sites and tools display more than one key feature.

And, in particular, because many such technologies can foster dialogue, they demonstrate significant potential for use in citizen engagement activities, in both the government and parliamentary spheres.

We will discuss later whether this potential is being fully utilised.

Which parliaments?

- national, state, territory and provincial parliaments
- parliaments both *old* and *new* eg:
 - the United Kingdom Parliament
 - the devolved Scottish Parliament
- parliaments both *small* and *large* eg:
 - the Yukon Legislative Assembly
 - the Canadian House of Commons

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The pool of respondent parliaments provided a comprehensive mix, including:

- national parliaments eg the New Zealand Parliament and the United Kingdom Parliament, as well as parliaments from states, territories and provinces (In Australia, all the state and territory parliaments participated as did the federal parliament (each House provided its own response);
- both older established parliaments (eg the UK Parliament at Westminster) and newer ones (the Scottish devolved Parliament established by the [Scotland Act 1998](#) and which [first met](#) on 12 May 1999) (a young parliament, but known for its proactive stance on the use of technology); (*I'll talk more about this later.*)
- unicameral (Qld, Scotland, New Zealand) and bicameral legislatures; and
- parliaments spanning a range of sizes (from the Yukon Legislative Assembly with a staff contingent of 5 permanent officers to the Canadian House of Commons with more than 2,500).

Compiling the data

- Baseline data on technologies in use –
- point in time –
- tabular compilation – Click [here](#) to view.

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Parliaments self-reported on technologies in use or under consideration, together with those which had been discontinued or were not in use and not planned to be used. **For today's presentation, I have chosen to focus primarily on** those technologies which were in use: that data has been compiled into a table [[click on the link](#)].

The table has also been provided as a hard copy handout today.

[Moment to consider]

While the survey generated a wealth of information, not all of which could be summarised in my report to APLA on which this presentation is based, **ten key findings stood out and I will focus on those.**

1 Patterns of use

- All respondent parliaments were making use of digital technology in some form or another, but to quite varying extents.

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Firstly, all respondent parliaments were making use of digital technology in some form or another, but to quite varying extents. **The majority of respondents had been using those technologies they had implemented for more than, rather than under, one year.**

2-3 Using Web 2.0

- Not all respondents had yet started using *Web 2.0* technologies.
- Even fewer respondents had a specific *social media presence*.

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- While all respondents used some digital or online technologies, not all respondents had yet started using *Web 2.0* technologies (eg blogs, wikis, bookmarking tools, news sharing and ranking, podcasts, RSS feeds, social networking and/or content sharing sites) (and few could be said to be making extensive use of them) **(we'll look more closely at those who were shortly)**. However, the majority did have at least one such application in place.
- Even fewer respondents had a specific *social media* presence such as a page on a social networking site or an account with a microblogging service; where they did, and specified a service (or one could be ascertained from website information or prior knowledge), not too surprisingly, it was the hugely successful Facebook and Twitter which were the popular choices.

Web 2.0: benefits and drawbacks

The main benefit in using social media sites for the Scottish Parliament is the support of our public engagement goals and the opportunity to open up access to the parliament and its processes to large audience. The main drawbacks are the need to sustain the efforts and to perhaps choose the most appropriate forum given the limited resource we can put in to this area in a time of austerity.

As for the sites themselves they do have benefits of being familiar to people, easy to use, available in the locus people are already inhabiting, and carrying a new audience we may not otherwise reach. They also carry a risk of poor quality and unavailability beyond our control which may pose a reputational risk.

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Because Web 2.0 was a major focus of the survey, respondents' own views on its benefits and drawbacks were of particular interest. The Scottish Parliament provided this thoughtful summation of social media.

"The main benefit in using social media sites for the Scottish Parliament is the support of our public engagement goals and the opportunity to open up access to the parliament and its processes to large audience. The main drawbacks are the need to sustain the efforts and to perhaps choose the most appropriate forum given the limited resource we can put in to this area in a time of austerity.

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Web 2.0: benefits and drawbacks

We use Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis and have not found any drawbacks.

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Interestingly, as a counterpoint, the practical experience of the WA Legislative Council, probably one of the earlier Facebook and Twitter adopters among the Australian parliaments, has been that:

“We use Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis and have not found any drawbacks”.

#4 Which technologies were most widely used?

- There is still an emphasis on older, more established technologies over newer Web 2.0 technologies, and on one-way and information dissemination tools over bi-directional and more interactive technologies.

Top 3

- webcasting
- tele and/or video conferencing
- taking submissions electronically (ie by email) or via an online proforma; or posting submissions online

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Let's look next at which technologies were most widely used.

I found that there was still an emphasis on older, more established technologies over newer Web 2.0 technologies, and on one-way and information dissemination tools over bi-directional and more interactive technologies.

Thus, for instance, the most widely diffused technologies overall were:

- the **uni-directional** webcasting; and
- tele (and/or video) conferencing which, while fitting the description of being interactive and bi-directional in nature, is already a **fairly well established** technology (ie its use can be dated back to at least the late 1990s; improvements in the technology over time have facilitated its acceptance although infrastructure limitations still appear to limit the extent to which it may be employed.) Although it and webcasting were reported as being in use by the same number of parliaments overall, tele or video conferencing's use by various respondents was confined to fairly limited occasions over time or reserved for particular users or purposes (eg for deliberative meetings only, not for taking evidence; or restricted to Committee members and advisors).

It's noteworthy that these findings are similar to the results reported on a global scale in the [2010 World e-Parliament's Report](#) and which were based on its 2009 survey.

They are also consistent with the classic pattern of the diffusion of technology (characterised by initial slow uptake, which then gathers momentum as more becomes known about a technology's capabilities and as more choose to follow the lead of earlier adopters (the "snowball" effect)).

It would appear then that the **opportunities** for using more interactive tools for engagement are not being fully realised by parliaments.

At the same time, one must keep in mind that, at present, the advantages to parliaments of the relatively newer technologies like Facebook are probably yet to be fully determined (as has been noted by the [World e-Parliament 2010](#), p 34 and by my survey respondents as well).

#5 Which parliaments were the high adopters?

- Key examples of parliaments with multiple interfaces, including a marked social media presence were:
 - the United Kingdom Parliament and
 - the national devolved Scottish Parliament.
- In Australasia, the New Zealand Parliament and the Australian federal Parliament demonstrated the greatest range of technology use.

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Which parliaments in the survey group were using online technology more than others?

Key examples of parliaments with multiple interfaces, including a marked social media presence, are, from overseas (not including New Zealand), the United Kingdom Parliament (an older, historic parliament with whose Westminster traditions all other respondents to this survey have a connection) and the national devolved Scottish Parliament (now only a little over 10 years old).

In Australasia, the New Zealand Parliament and the Australian federal Parliament demonstrated the greatest range of technology use, although it was still not as extensive as that employed by the UK and Scottish Parliaments.

#6 Factors in adoption

- The “weight of tradition” need not slow technology adoption.

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Next I'd like to talk about a couple of factors commonly thought to affect adoption by parliaments or organisations generally and how those ideas sit with the survey findings. For instance, one train of thought says that cultural and institutional factors – in particular, the newness of a parliament - may influence its willingness to embrace new technology on the ground that and, I quote: “*new purpose built parliaments have an advantage over those with longer historic traditions and buildings, since they can more easily incorporate ICTs into their agendas and infrastructure*”.

The example of the Scottish Parliament, whose establishment (in the late 1990s) was underpinned by the intent that IT should be utilised to support the Parliament's founding principles of openness and participation, is often cited in support of this argument; see:

- Gibson et al , 'Representative democracy and the Internet', Chapter 1, in Rachel K Gibson, Andrea Rommele and Stephen J Ward (eds), *Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, organisation and participation via new ICTs*, Routledge Press, 2004 at p 9, from which the quote above comes;
- Colin F Smith and Paul Gray, 'The Scottish Parliament: [Re-]Shaping Parliamentary Democracy in the Information Age', in Stephen Coleman, John Taylor and Wim van de Donk (eds), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 66-79; and
- the Scottish Parliament's [Report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament: Shaping Scotland's Parliament](#), presented to the Secretary of State for Scotland, The Scottish Office, December 1998.)

However, the inclusion of the United Kingdom Parliament among the leaders or high adopters may serve to illustrate that it is **not inevitable** that the weight of tradition referred to in the literature, and in responses to the survey itself, will slow technology adoption.

#7 Factors in adoption

Size need not be a barrier to adoption.

The ACT Legislative Assembly is a small parliament with limited resources and needs to be particularly discerning about the nature and range of technologies it invests in. This doesn't mean we are not innovative: We introduced what we think is the first indexed audio-visual replay system of parliamentary proceedings last year (Daily on Demand) and we encourage on-line feedback after each committee inquiry. The Chamber Support Office has set up a Twitter site to alert followers to the progress of Assembly business.

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Just as it is thought that newer parliaments may have an edge when it comes to innovation, so it is also commonly believed that larger organisations will have an advantage and the master table (SLIDE No. 6) does suggest that smaller parliaments may tend to lag somewhat in the adoption of new digital technology. While it is reasonable to expect that a parliament's size (and thus, presumably, its resources) may play a factor, it is, of course, likely to be only part of the equation, as my survey responses revealed (as well as collecting information on use patterns, the survey asked questions about the reasons underlying adoption or discontinuance of particular technologies and about factors that might enhance a parliament's uptake of digital technology).

Specifically, the survey illustrated that, considered against criteria such as the willingness to implement new technologies; the stage in the diffusion process at which a technology is adopted; and/or as innovators themselves), smaller parliaments should not be discounted. As you can see from the slide above, I have taken the ACT Legislative Assembly as a case in point.

Other examples

- At the time of the survey, the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island, with less than 70 staff, had recently (as of November 2010) begun to use microblogging (namely Twitter) (ahead of Queensland).
- Of all the respondent parliaments, the Scottish Parliament appeared to be the one which was currently using, or had trialled, the most technologies.
- While the ACT Legislative Assembly implemented what it believes to be the first indexed replay of parliamentary proceedings - in 2010 (to view Daily on Demand, [click here](#)), the Queensland Legislative Assembly launched what it believed was the first [searchable](#) archive of broadcast proceedings - in February 2011.

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But there are others, for instance:

- At the time of the survey, the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island, with less than 70 staff, had recently (as of November 2010) begun to use microblogging (namely Twitter) (ahead of Queensland, I might note).
- Of all the respondent parliaments, the Scottish Parliament appeared to be the one which was currently using, or had trialled, the most technologies.
- Scotland had also led the world in trialling the implementation of e-petitioning back in February 2000, followed very closely by Queensland (August 2002). Neither are particularly large parliaments, on a relative scale. (Scotland reported a staff establishment of 500; Qld reported 185 staff at Parliament House and 220 Electorate Officers.)
- While the ACT Legislative Assembly implemented what it believes to be the first indexed replay of parliamentary proceedings - in 2010 (to view Daily on Demand, [click here](#)), the Queensland Legislative Assembly launched what it believed was the first [searchable](#) archive of broadcast proceedings - in February 2011.

#8 Substitutes or complements?

Respondents generally were of the view that new digital technologies will extend the range of options open to parliaments, rather than displace older, more traditional forms of communication entirely.

- *They can only be alternatives. Otherwise those without access to technology are excluded. (Australian House of Representatives)*
- *While digital technologies will expand the communication options it will not replace the traditional methods of communication in the foreseeable future. While digital technologies provide greater access it does not guarantee depth of engagement, especially for activities such as giving evidence. NSW (joint submission from both Houses of Parliament)*

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Another key issue that I looked at was whether survey respondents thought new digital technologies were likely to be employed as *substitutes* for (ie instead of), or simply *in addition to*, more conventional methods of communication (such as taking evidence orally and face to face at public or private hearings; organisational websites or pages).

Of all the survey questions, this question generated probably the most lengthy responses.

As the quoted comments illustrate, respondents generally were of the view that new digital technologies will extend the range of options open to parliaments, rather than displace older, more traditional forms of communication entirely.

Because teleconferencing had been specifically referred to when the question was posed, a number of respondents did focus on tele or video conferencing technology but other technologies were also used to illustrate points made. While the consensus was that **tele or video conferencing** would remain an alternative only, there were slightly different viewpoints about the status of **online submissions**. The ACT Legislative Assembly nominated the **printed Hansard** as *[t]he only communication tool likely to be superseded in the future by digital technology ... now it is available electronically but noted that "even that move is likely to be resisted by readers"*.

Significant concerns which were highlighted by respondents included:

- the key philosophical issue of equity of access (a theme which underlay more than one submission);
- budgetary considerations;
- whether there was sufficient evidence a technology's relative advantage was such as to justify its entirely replacing a predecessor; and
- the impact on the life cycle of innovations of the current very fast pace of change in relation to information and communication technology.

9: Strategic Oversight

- Few parliaments had dedicated policies dealing with digital technology generally or the use of social media specifically.
- Evaluation of new digital technology was limited.

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Earlier today, in the context of challenges and opportunities associated with online technologies, I asked what parliaments were doing to coordinate the implementation and use of online technologies.

In this survey, I found that:

- Few respondent parliaments, big or small, old or new, had dedicated policies dealing with digital technology and, in particular, about the use of social media (on the latter point, the Scottish Parliament was the singular exception).
- Few parliaments reported undertaking evaluations of new digital technology, either pre or post adoption. This is disappointing, given that the [World e-Parliament Report 2010](#) described greater research and evaluation of the effectiveness of information and communication technologies as “one of the most pressing needs” (p 37 and Chapter 1).

However, it is in line with findings published in the [2010 World e-Parliament’s Report](#), which indicated that only a low proportion of respondent parliaments (17%) reported that they had conducted any formal or informal assessments (p 37).

However, while none of the respondents in my survey reported systematically undertaking evaluations of new digital technology, either pre or post adoption, parliaments did report a range of methods for assessing technology generally including usability testing, traditional usage statistics (such as statistics on website usage) as well as Google analytics, plus Members’ surveys, together with evaluations of *specific* technologies.

#10 Future Trends

- Based on parliaments' reported intentions about future adoption of technologies, it appeared that at least some of the gaps between parliaments might be beginning to narrow.

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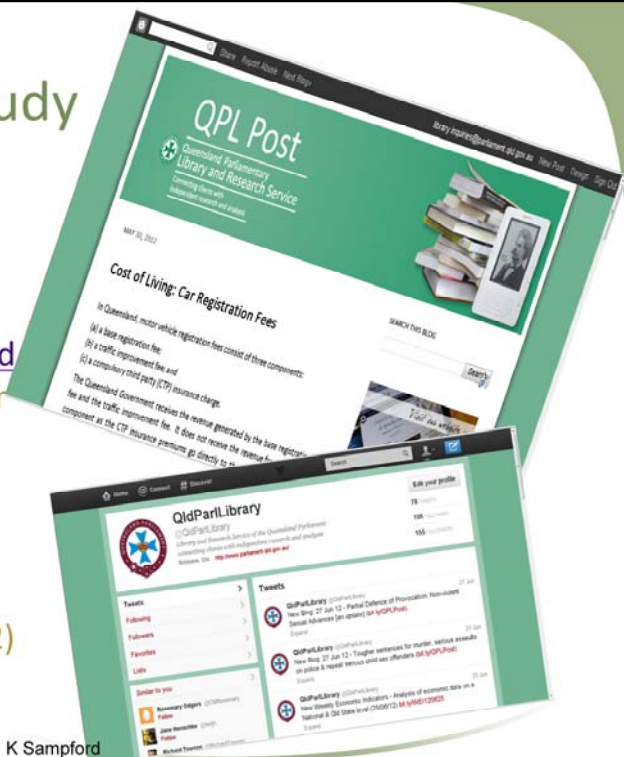
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Finally, based on parliaments' reported intentions about future adoption of technologies, it appeared that at least some of the gaps between parliaments might be beginning to narrow.

My own Parliament serves as a case in point, illustrating how quickly the picture can change. At the time of the original survey, the Queensland Parliament could be characterised as a low adopter of Web 2.0 technologies. **Facebook had been used in the first instance for a specific parliamentary committee's youth related inquiry but that was about it.**

Qld as a case study

- **Parliamentary Library**
Twitter feed
(<https://twitter.com/QldParLibrary>) (September 2011)
- **Library research blog**
(**QPL Post**) (March 2012)



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But subsequently, here in Queensland, the Parliamentary Library established a [Twitter](https://twitter.com/QldParLibrary) feed (September 2011) (<https://twitter.com/QldParLibrary>).

The Parliament itself also established an official [Twitter](#) account (@QldParliament) and set up a [Facebook](#) page (both began in November 2011) on a trial basis which has now ended; the Queensland Parliament has no immediate plans to continue.

In March 2012 the Library launched its research blog, [QPL Post](http://qplpost.blogspot.com.au/), at <http://qplpost.blogspot.com.au/>. By creating a Web 2.0 platform for the quick, proactive delivery of key information in a concise form (around 1,000 words), **QPL Post** aims to provide an early lead in to issues that are or may be the subject of legislative review (complementing the Library's in-house **Legislation Forecasting Alert**.) Our hope was that this would serve to facilitate the assistance the Library can provide to the new Parliamentary Committee system, formally established in mid 2011.

On a final note, the Queensland Parliament is considering a social media policy and is watching with interest the progress in other jurisdictions.

Outcomes - Comparative statistics?

- Ideally, perhaps key baseline data of the sort this study has generated could be uploaded onto sites of professional bodies such as [APLA](#) and [ANZACATT](#).
- Each parliament could update information and add relevant links if so desired, thereby creating an ongoing overview of trends in usage and ready reference to examples of specific applications in use for “new players”.

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[This slide may be optional depending upon time available.]

[Lead in] Lastly, in closing I would just like to offer some thoughts about how the information that has been collected could be put to good purpose.

Ideally, perhaps key baseline data of the sort this study has generated could be uploaded onto sites of professional bodies such as APLA and ANZACATT.

Each parliament could update information and add relevant links if so desired, thereby creating an ongoing overview of trends in usage and ready reference to examples of specific applications in use for “new players”. **Notably, and very much in the spirit of Web 2.0, many of my respondents provided examples and links, thereby generating a wealth of shared information and experience.**

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