



Joint IPU-ASGP conference, in partnership with the IFLA section on Parliamentary Libraries and Research Services and the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament¹

Parliamentary representation and communication, and the role of social media

26 October 2012

Quebec City (Canada)

Background note

The use of social media is growing exponentially, including but not only among young people. Parliamentarians are increasingly using the same social networks to share information with their constituents. There is also pressure on parliaments as institutions to adopt similar methods of communication, to keep pace with changes in society. The ability to make effective use of these tools impacts the representative role of parliaments, whether negatively or positively.

In countries where social media are not yet widely used, other innovative uses of technology can be observed in parliament, such as text messaging via SMS. To the extent that they serve similar purposes of representation and communication, these innovative uses will be also considered during the conference.

MPs and the parliamentary institution are using social media in different ways and with different objectives. While there is often a clear distinction between political or institutional uses, the lines may sometimes be blurred, possibly leading to unintended political outcomes.

- MPs seek to establish a relationship with their electors, and express their political views. For MPs, social media presents opportunities but also risks, for their reputation and public image. For many, it represents a technological leap into the unknown that may feel unfamiliar or threatening. Many MPs may expect the parliamentary administration to make it possible for them to integrate parliamentary content (such as video recordings of their speeches in parliament, or legislative documents) in their own social media and web sites.
- The parliamentary institution, meanwhile, communicates non-partisan information about parliamentary activities, with the purpose of informing and engaging citizens. The interactive nature of social media requires parliament to find an appropriate 'voice' with which to speak on behalf of the institution in a politically impartial manner.
- In addition, parliaments are starting to consider how to 'listen' to citizens via social media, and be responsive to their views. For example, parliaments may seek to use social media to gauge public opinion on certain issues, or as a source of input to the legislative process.
- Meanwhile, civil society groups are increasingly making use of social media to mobilize on issues and lobby for change, and parliaments need to develop effective strategies for dealing with this input.

¹ The Global Centre for ICT in Parliament is a partnership initiative launched by the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society (www.ictparliament.org).

Social media present a number of management challenges for parliament, such as the development of usage policies and the allocation of responsibilities and resources. The use of social media in parliament's online communication strategy also raises questions about the dissemination of public and non-public information and its integration with other tools such as video, SMS messaging, web sites, blogs and e-mail.

In this emerging area of online interaction between citizens and representative institutions, there is very little in the way of practical guidance or lessons learned for parliaments. This conference aims to fill that gap, leading to more effective representation and communication.

Objective and outcome

For MPs and the parliamentary administration, the use of social media remains at an experimental stage. The objective of this conference is therefore to exchange experience on the risks and benefits of social media, and to contribute to more effective use of social media by parliaments.

The conference will contain a mix of policy discussions with practical demonstrations of different uses of social media by MPs and parliaments. It will build on the recently-published Global Parliamentary Report (www.ipu.org/gpr) on evolutions in the relations between parliaments and citizens, as well as work done by the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, notably the findings of previous World e-Parliament Conferences, and World e-Parliament Reports.

The outcome will be a document that establishes basic principles on the use of social media by parliaments and/or identifies the key questions that parliaments need to answer when establishing or strengthening social media policies. This document will serve parliamentary administrations, including Secretaries General, communications, libraries, research services and ICT departments. It will provide a state-of-the-art benchmark for parliaments that are already using social media, and practical advice for parliaments as they begin to do so.

A draft document will be prepared in advance by an expert working group, for the consideration of conference participants. After the conference, the document will be sent to the IPU and/or ASGP for discussion and potential adoption.

The IPU's Third Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights, adopted at the 126th Assembly a subject item entitled 'The use of media, including social media, to enhance citizen engagement and democracy'. This theme will be debated in Quebec, and a resolution will be adopted in Ecuador in April 2013. There should be an interesting complementarity with the IPU-ASGP conference and the debate in the IPU's Third Standing Committee.

Participants

The conference is targeted at parliamentarians, Secretaries General and parliamentary staff involved in social media. Due to the multi-faceted nature of social media, the conference may interest staff working in communications, IT, web management, library and research services.

Previous experience has shown that the conference typically attracts between 80 and 150 participants. As it is being held during the IPU Assembly this year, it is possible that there will be a high level of participation from MPs.

Organization of the conference

The conference will be jointly organized by the IPU and the ASGP, in partnership with the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament and the IFLA section on Parliamentary Libraries and Research Services.

The conference will take place on Friday 26 October in Quebec City, Canada. This is the last day of the 127th IPU Assembly and ASGP meeting.

Interpretation will be provided in English, French and Spanish.