Communicating Europe:
why so controversial?
The Parliament's webTV project

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Introduction

The rejection of the European Constitution by French and Dutch voters in the early summer of 2005 provoked much soul-searching within the EU institutions. A lengthy period of reflection began, with everyone very uncertain about what to do next. However, such uncertainty was not synonymous with inactivity. A rather broad consensus held that the institutions had to do much more to communicate what they were doing. 70% of Europe's citizens claimed to know very little or practically nothing about the EU and so most felt that an improved information effort was one of the ways to fill the perceived gap between the Brussels world and everybody else. After all, the EU was still producing plenty of legislation, often on highly controversial subjects, such as Reach and the Services Directive, but apparently only a minority of the citizens knew what was happening or realised that it was relevant to them.

The best-known proposals developed to improve the flow of information and to reduce the gap emerged from the Commission. Margot Wallstrom, Vice-President of the Commission, put forward a series of ideas in 2005 and 2006 under the overall title of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, designed to coordinate the institutions' communication strategy. However, there was much activity beyond the corridors of the Commission. This paper will concentrate on the European Parliament's efforts to create a webTV channel, designed to enable EU citizens to know and understand better what the Parliament they elected is doing.

The initiative proved to be highly controversial and its fate has yet to be decided. Enthusiasts

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1 The opinions expressed in this paper are strictly personal and in no way represent the official position of the European Parliament

for the project are confronted with strong opponents, inside as well as outside the institution. This confrontation is not fortuitous: examining its roots can tell us much about the controversial character of communication at EU level. In particular, the story tells us that the arrival of new technology, notably the internet, has not served to dampen that controversy but rather to displace the argument. Old debates about control of communication and the autonomy of different actors in the EU have been overlaid with new concerns about how to behave in a new environment where individual citizens expect to be able to choose between when and where they look for the information they need and to express their own view about that information.

   The paper will start by outlining the origins and development of the webTV project in the Parliament and will then turn to the different reasons why it has proved to be controversial, despite (or because of?) the new technical possibilities of the web. It will consider the controversy from three perspectives: first, inter-institutionally, with the Parliament seeking to establish a separate media presence amongst the EU institutions, following the model of other parliaments round the world; second, in terms of the clash between the aim to create a channel perceived as credible from the outside and the desire of those inside to control how they are portrayed; and third, in terms of the increasing tension between a more traditional hierarchically-organised form of communication and a looser more individualistic network approach, where the provider of information can no longer easily dictate the terms of a conversation but is pushed to becoming just another participant. The outcome of the webTV experiment will illustrate the state of the argument in all three of these domains.

The origins of the Parliament's webTV project

The idea of creating a television channel for the European Parliament is one that had occasionally surfaced over the years since direct elections in 1979. The spectacular development of C-SPAN in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s provided an important point of reference and suggested that it was possible to present a parliamentary body on television in such a way that it could win a substantial number of viewers.   The fact that today 4% of the American people, something like 12 million people, say they watch one of C-SPAN's three television channels on a daily basis is something that is bound to encourage attempts at emulation, whatever the differences between the European and American contexts. One serious attempt was made in the 1990s when a project was launched to create a European television information channel under the umbrella of an organisation called EPITEL. Despite strong support from inside the Parliament and from a range

of outside organisations in Brussels, the entry of €900.000 into the Commission budget was not sufficient to get the project off the ground. It was decided instead to develop EbS (Europe by Satellite), a facility that provides live and recorded coverage of events taking place in the European institutions and makes its material available free to all broadcasters. EbS is very definitely not a television channel and its existence did not stop the search for more direct means of conveying to European citizens what the institutions are doing. Indeed the idea gained in strength in an environment where coverage of parliamentary activity on public service channels was declining in most countries, as a result of the pressure to compete for higher audience figures.

A critical change came about towards the end of the 1990s when a number of parliamentary channels started up in various European countries and provided a point of comparison for the European Parliament. These channels are extremely diverse in nature: some restrict themselves to full coverage of plenary proceedings, while others have developed a much broader range of programming; some are run from inside and are financed by the Parliament, others obtain their images from the Parliament but are run by national or private broadcasters. This range can be illustrated from two particular examples, in France and the UK.

The French National Assembly and Senate provide a particularly powerful illustration of the possibilities of broadcasting by a Parliament. Together in 1999 they created a channel (better described as two channels, run by separate outside companies, broadcasting on the same wavelength, with time shared equally) that is entirely financed by the two houses. The commitment to fulfilling a public service obligation has helped to make it possible to reconcile the independence of these two companies with the financial control of the two chambers. Both have a staff (totalling together over 100) that is not employed by the Assembly or the Senate. The journalists amongst them make a wide range of programmes on all aspects of political life, with up to six hours out of the 24 hour schedule put out "live". Only 20% of the material comes from the proceedings of the Parliament, the remaining 80% being made up of specially devised programmes. In the six weeks prior to the French referendum, for example, the channel covering the Assembly produced 150 hours of programming on the European Constitution. It has proved a relatively expensive venture, costing at present around €25 million per year, with a rather modest number of viewers (around 700,000). Inevitably this has provoked criticism but it has gradually become part of the French political landscape, a tendency reinforced by the placing of the channels on the TNT digital transmission network, which now reaches some 85% of French homes.

The BBC Parliament channel provides a very different model. It does broadcast 24 hours a day,

seven days a week, like the French but its output is mainly live or recorded material from the chamber or committees of the Parliament and it does not have a substantial staff, as in France, making background programmes, something reflected in its much lower running costs (around €3 million per year).   Moreover, it is entirely separate from the Parliament itself. Westminster simply provides the images that the channel (and indeed any other channel) wishes to use. It can then choose freely how it wants to organise its programming and can call on the broader resources of the BBC to improve its visibility, for example, by inclusion of its schedule in the Radio Times.

 Other parliamentary channels have chosen different variants. Some have kept the organisation of the channel inside the Parliament but concentrated coverage on the plenaries or committees of the institution: this is the case, for example, in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg; some have sought to follow the French in expanding the range of coverage, a good example being Greece where films and documentaries have become an important part of the output of a channel run from inside the institution.

The existence of these channels served to encourage the European Parliament to review the idea of a television channel for itself. In March 2005 the Bureau (the President plus the 14 Vice-Presidents) invited the administration to launch a study to examine various possibilities for creating a broadcast channel for the European Parliament.   The study, known as the "Howkins report", was presented to the Bureau in September 2005. It reached a very different conclusion from the one that might have been expected in the brief that the consultants were given. It essentially dismissed the various ideas for a broadcast channel with which they were presented and instead recommended that the institution investigate the creation of a webTV channel.

The study suggested that the best time for the Parliament to have achieved its aims of reaching out to European citizens by means of a broadcast channel would have been in the 1980s but that changing technology and consumer preferences made it an outdated option, quite apart from being a very costly one.   The spread of broadband connections across Europe, though not uniform geographically or across the generations, is expanding everywhere (it has now reached around 80 million) and is almost universally considered a positive development that should be encouraged. The Commission launched a campaign in March 2006, called "Broadband for All", and precisely designed to expand internet access, particularly in rural and remote areas.

This spread of broadband has coincided with an era in which interactive TV and online services are becoming part of the everyday life of many Europeans, particularly the young. A recent

survey[2] revealed that 45% of Europeans are already watching TV on the internet and do not wish to be tied by the linear scheduling of broadcasters. Nearly 60% of the French sample chooses to watch previews and episodes of their favourite shows via the web.   This preference for using the web is revealed by the fact that the time spent on the computer is starting to compete with that spent in front of the television. In the UK the average Briton is said now to spend around 164 minutes online every day, compared with 148 minutes watching television (Guardian, 8 March 2006).   Moreover, the possibility that in the not too distant future, television and the web will converge and allow consumers to have a single piece of equipment to allow them to access audiovisual services made it all the more difficult to justify the extremely expensive entry into the television market.

The Howkins report reinforced its argumentation by pointing to the relative costs of the various options. It suggested that no broadcast channel could cost less than an annual amount of €25 million (comparable to the French Parliament channel) but that it would be likely to substantially exceed that amount, totalling as much as €60 million or more. By contrast, it expressed confidence that a webTV channel could be financed for less than €10 million. Fixed distribution and transmission costs would be low and would rise in line with increased content and increased usage. It would therefore cost significantly less per viewer, with the added benefit that the development of the number of viewers and the time they spent on the channel ("dwell time") could be explicitly measured and analyzed.

There were also arguments in the report that related specifically to the Parliament. A web channel makes it much easier to create material in all EU languages – something that is extremely difficult to do with broadcast channels. Subtitles offer a way of supplementing material with interpretation to reach a multinational audience, including those that are hard of hearing. Hence there was every reason to believe that any European citizen would be able to follow an internet based channel, in a way that they would be very unlikely to be able to do on a broadcast channel.

On the basis of these arguments, the study put forward a vision of what a webTV channel for the Parliament would look like:

> "Our proposal is to seize the opportunity that technology offers, and build an entire website around video, leaving the "europarl" website to continue to be a reference site (the equivalent of a valuable encyclopaedia). Our proposed site would look more like a

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2 See http://www.bplec.co.uk/magsites/ibe/content/text/newsarticle.asp?ArticleID=3158

"video magazine", or a series of TV magazines, aimed at different audiences. These

magazines, or "channels", would be aimed at the casual audience as well as the

specialist…enabling the viewer to watch a variety of unique content".

The Bureau unanimously accepted the arguments presented in the report. By January 2006 it was ready to endorse the proposal of going out to open public tender to identify two companies to assist the Parliament in the realisation of such a web channel, one to provide the architecture and design for the channel and the other to produce content for the channel. The two companies were to produce an in-house prototype to present to the Parliament and only if that prototype was agreed would the channel go online. In other words, it was acknowledged that the Parliament did not have the resources itself either to create the platform for the channel or to create the material to be put on the channel. It had therefore chosen the route of external assistance.

More than a year has passed since the decision in principle was taken and a prototype will not be presented to members before the second half of this year. A contract has been signed with a company to create the platform but the tender for the contents has still to be allocated. This can be explained in part by the difficulties of entering a market where the Parliament does not have any experience: tendering procedures in the EU are notoriously complex and particularly in an arena where the products requested cannot be easily measured. The imagination of programme makers, for example, is not a commodity easily quantified. However, it is also a sign of the considerable controversy that the proposal has generated. The favourable reception in the Bureau was not replicated throughout the Parliament or indeed everywhere outside the institution. There was and remains much less than unanimity that webTV will enable the institution to communicate better with citizens. The reasons why people do not agree on this project can tell us much about the essentially contestable nature of communicating Europe. It is to these reasons that we will now turn.

Creating a separate identity for the Parliament

One of the central tenets of the European institutions is that of inter-institutional cooperation. No institution wishes to be accused of not cooperating with the others. And yet the reality is that the process of working together is laced with a considerable degree of competition. Each body wishes to take the lead in developing policy but all also wish to retain their autonomy and not be subject to

any relation of formal subordination.

This balance between cooperation and competition has made itself felt in relation to communication as much as elsewhere. The consensus about the perceived need to communicate better and to do so in a coordinated way has proved skin-deep. When the Commission came forward with its Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, it found itself subject to sustained attack from inside as well as outside the institutions, an attack that revealed the very political nature of communication. No-one wanted to allow the Commission to enjoy a privileged role in determining the conditions for communication; all wanted to protect their own interests as sources of information about the European Union.

The contrast between the Parliament and the Commission can be well illustrated by comparing the Parliament resolution on EU Information and Communication Strategy adopted in May 2005 and the later resolution on the White Paper on a European communication policy prepared by the Commission that was voted in February 2006. The tone of the former was broadly positive, calling on the Commission to take account of certain priorities, but once the White Paper was adopted and presented to Parliament, the tone changed markedly. The idea that better communication was a shared goal where all could agree on the most appropriate means proved illusory.

The Parliament adopted a very critical view towards the general approach of the Commission. It did not consider that the Commission's avowed aim of listening to citizens found any practical expression in the White Paper; it turned down the Commission idea that communication with EU citizens should be subject to a code of conduct accepted by all parties, including the EP; and it joined the ranks of the Brussels-based media in welcoming the withdrawal of the proposal on the creation of an EU news agency. In other words, it doubted that the Commission really knew how to listen, it insisted on its own autonomy and it resisted the idea of a structure that could be easily portrayed as a tool of propaganda.

A central tension in much of the discussion of communication has been that between the idea of Europe as a commodity that needs to be marketed better and the notion of Europe as a process where differences of view are aired and debated and agreements are reached (sooner or later). This tension was also reflected in the 2006 resolution that called on the Commission:

> "to develop a dynamic and reactive communication policy, which, instead of mostly reporting the final consensus achieved, is more focused on reporting the evolution of

decisions that are adopted at different stages in the decision-making process" (para.29)

This comment points to a structural difference between the two institutions that necessarily affects their approaches to communication. The Parliament is driven by the Treaty provisions to reach decisions but much of its work revolves round the process by which those decisions are reached. Not all of that process is visible to the outside but considerably more than can be seen in either the Commission or the Council. They are not parliamentary bodies (however hard the Parliament may wish to encourage the Council to move in this direction) and are bound therefore to assume a rather different approach, geared to "the final consensus".

For its part, the Commission wanted to persuade all the other institutions to join it in establishing clearer rules and defining new institutional arrangements for information about Europe. This more hierarchical conception made it initially at least less than fully receptive to the webTV initiative. Instead of accepting it as part of the autonomous sphere of action of the Parliament, it wondered why the initiative could not have been coordinated with the work of the Commission. In addition, there were those who doubted whether the choice of the web was a good one. An internal document of the Directorate General for Communication adopted a distinctly sceptical tone about broader use of the internet, presenting a different assessment from that of the Howkins report as to the rate at which coverage of EU territory via broadband internet lines was likely to progress:

> "Urban areas are relatively well covered, particularly in EU-15, but the rural outlying
> areas and the territories of the EU-10 States will not be covered for the next 10 or 15
> years. The number of broadband connections is estimated at 40 million in early 2005
> (businesses and households combined), or the equivalent of 8.9% of the EU-25
> population. It is due to rise to 30% of the population.

Behind the statistics lay a tension based on two different conceptions of communication: a more traditional hierarchically-organised form of communication and a looser, more individualistic network approach. From the first perspective, it was important to establish clearer rules and to define new institutional arrangements for information about Europe to be communicated more effectively; from the second, it was necessary to preserve the autonomy of the various actors involved and to acknowledge that evolving technology was making it possible to convey a much

more diverse set of messages about the EU, without imposing extra rules. These two approaches were not exclusive to any institution – the Parliament contains members favouring the development of a stronger interinstitutional communications policy, and within the Commission there are individual DGs that are experimenting with new forms of communication using the internet – but there remains a difference of perspective of the two institutions born of their different functions.

A similar tension existed between the Parliament and the Council. In the last two years the Council has gone to considerable lengths to improve coverage of its proceedings[3] on the net but there are inevitable limitations. It is not able to show meetings in their entirety and in any case, has expressed no wish to provide a channel of the kind proposed in the Parliament. It is not driven by the pressure to be directly accountable for its actions in the way the EP is and thus has a more limited sense of needing to go further than to make its proceedings more transparent.

Perhaps one should also see the decision of the Parliament to develop a webTV channel as an expression of its greater role as an institutional actor in the EU system. In earlier years it might have felt constrained to look for a solution through other institutions (precisely what happened with EPITEL in 1996) and in any case, at that time there were no other channels to emulate. Now it could legitimate its actions on the basis of comparison.   No other parliament had chosen the idea of a web-based solution, though most are increasingly placing their output on the web as well as broadcasting it. Yet all felt the need to do more to ensure that the citizens that had elected them were better informed about what they were doing.   Hence it was that much easier for the Parliament to assert its difference vis-à-vis the other institutions in the area of communication, a position that few are now inclined to contest.

Credibility versus control

Many conditions will have to be met for the prototype of the webTV channel to be accepted by the Parliament. It will have to work – no constant buffering; it will have to be attractive to look at and easy to manipulate – not too many instructions to master; it will have to accommodate all languages and not to favour some – multilingualism is a sacred commodity in a democratic institution like the Parliament. And yet the central argument will be about the contents and the arrangements made for determining what the contents will be.   Here we start to see the outline of a second area of dispute.

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3 For Council Live, see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=1102&lang=EN&mode=g

On the one side, there is a wish to create a channel that is considered a credible source of information about the institution, on the other, there is inevitable temptation of those who finance an activity to have a say in how it is organised. Hence setting up a structure for managing a channel is not a purely technical matter or even mainly technical.   The former Head of the Knesset Network in Israel had very specific experience to draw on when he commented:

> "Politicians tend to see things in political terms: left versus right, minority versus majority, coalition versus opposition; this is what parliament is all about. So before you know it, you might find that your nice little new television channel is becoming a pawn in the political game" (IPU – EBU – ASGP (2007) p.6)

Prescient words!   The potential difficulties in defining the limits of coverage as well as the rules applicable became clear in the Parliament when it adopted the resolution for the 2007 budget. It specified that the political groups should be involved in ensuring an appropriate level of supervision over the output of the channel.   The resolution placed the appropriations and the staff for the project into the budgetary reserve "until the prototype, the content and the cost of the project including the structures and level of participation of political groups in the definition of the contents of the programmes are presented to the budgetary authority for its final decision" (Minutes of 26 October 2006).

The terms of this resolution reflected in part a long-running rivalry between the Bureau of the Parliament and the Committee on Budgets. With the former given the task of deciding on the organisation of the institution and the latter having the final say over the provision of the necessary finance, there has always been a tussle over where the remit of one ends and that of the other begins. However, the wording also reflects a concern of at least some of the political groups of the Parliament that they should have a say over the contents of the webTV channel. How that say should be organised is one of the central reasons for the controversy over the project.

In initial discussions in the early summer of 2006, the Bureau and the Conference of Presidents, made up of the leaders of the political groups, agreed to the proposal to create an advisory panel composed of one representative per political group with the task of overseeing the channel and dealing with individual complaints.   This idea was derived from practice in other parliaments, notably in France where the Board of Directors is composed of one individual per party to ensure that whatever the political majority, everyone is represented.

However, the precise details were left for later and are under discussion at the present time. Some certainly want to fill in the details by giving the advisory panel substantial powers but such a proposal would be liable to create substantial conflict with the Bureau, the originator of the proposal. Moreover, there are obvious difficulties in seeking to establish rules for a web channel rather than a broadcast channel. In the latter case, it is possible to calculate precisely the amount of time received by each group. The European Parliament has a well-established mechanism for distributing posts known as the d'Hondt system that ensures that all groups are represented in proportion to their strength. It is certainly possible to envisage a system that would ensure that over a specific time all groups would be represented in this way. However, the difficulty is that in any web-based system it is the viewer who decides what she or he wants to watch, thereby effectively undermining any attempt to ensure that the number of messages received by viewers is in proportion to the strength of the political groups. Production can be managed but not the decisions of the viewers.

In any case a way will have to be found to ensure that those engaged in political debate are satisfied that the rules of the game are such as not to favour their opponents. In Israel it has proved possible to establish an independent structure for running the Knesset channel, despite the finance coming from the Parliament. Similarly, in France, the companies that produce the material for the parliamentary channel enjoy a large measure of independence under the overall supervision of the Presidents of the National Assembly and the Senate. Both are the product of particular national circumstances that are not easily replicated at European level, where different solutions will probably have to be developed.

One possible approach is to lay down an editorial charter that establishes the ground rules to be respected by the institution as well as the body responsible for making programmes under the aegis of the Parliament. Such a charter can provide for the need to respect political balance and for the relevant figures to be provided on a regular basis to reassure those involved. In practice, the results might not be so different from experience in the French Parliament, where complaints normally link not to political balance but to the failure to involve a specific member in a particular programme in his or her area of competence.

Whatever the structure that is devised, an essential decision to be taken is the extent of coverage, something where opinions differ widely. The most conservative approach would be to restrict coverage on the web to the plenary sessions. In fact, such coverage is already established and does not require a specific web channel. Indeed there is agreement in principle to use the

audiovisual record of previous sessions as the formal record, replacing the full written translations that are at present produced.   Anyone will therefore be able to look back at any speech made at any plenary in any language.   Moreover, the institution is in the process of equipping committee rooms with cameras, making it possible to extend such wall-to-wall coverage to the meetings of committees in the same way as happens at present at the Scottish Parliament on their own dedicated site covering proceedings (www.holyrood.tv).

   The usefulness of such coverage on the web should not be underestimated. The web brings with it surprises that can be easily measured. On 16 May 2006, for example, a debate on enlargement provoked a dramatic wave of interest in Romania. Of a total of more than 22,000 visits to the site in the course of that day, more than 60% were from Romania.   For the first time, they could watch and listen to discussions at the Parliament interpreted into their own language. And this occurred without the Parliament developing a major marketing campaign to let Romanians know that the debate would take place and would be available on the web.

   Such coverage can be controversial – the shots that are taken, showing an empty chamber, covering protests from members or others – but rules can and have been developed to manage such controversy. Much more difficult is acceptance of the Howkins philosophy, accepted by the Bureau, that content should go beyond this. Coverage of debates of the Parliament, whether in plenary or in committee, are very difficult to understand on their own, particularly when they are taking place in an institution that is unknown to the vast majority of electors. The point was well made in a discussion paper presented at the conference of national parliaments held in Geneva in October 2006 by the Indian Parliament, Lok Sabha. It had decided to set up its own channel after the Indian Broadcasting authorities decided to stop broadcasting the activities of the Parliament. It insisted that it had to do more than simple direct broadcasting:

> "The Speaker's intention in setting up the channel was to ensure that, while the proceedings of the House were made widely available through the live telecast, the channel carried other programmes on subjects related to the functioning of the House and to the issues that have engaged, or are engaging its attention, and that needed to be presented to the people. These programmes would be of interest to viewers because they would try to demystify the working of the House and on the other, keep them

informed of the issues being, or those that have been, considered in the House by their elected representatives" [4].

The act of "demystification" still leaves the precise definition open to further debate. One step forward can be taken by arguing in favour of educational material. The law establishing the French parliamentary channel specifically envisages it as having an educational role. A similar philosophy underlines an initiative of the Danish Parliament that commissioned twelve short films to show the workings of the institution and has placed them on its website at http://www.ft.dk/mediatek/. And the UK Parliament also has two short films on its website showing how Parliament and its scrutiny committees work. Such efforts are unlikely to provoke major dispute.

What though of including news about what is happening in the institution at the moment? To move in this direction is to move into a more controversial arena. First, it raises the issue of who is going to choose what is newsworthy and how is it going to be presented. The European Parliament has already been faced with this issue as it has started to develop a website directed to the general public. The Headlines page of the website includes an increasing number of stories every day designed to present news in an understandable way. Web journalists covering the full range of languages do this job and are effectively doing in print what a webTV channel could do audiovisually.

Second, it creates a potential tension with traditional broadcasters, who see their own work being obliged to compete with material supported by a public subsidy, at a time of declining viewership and for the private channels, a marked reduction in advertising revenue. By its very nature the web has reduced the costs of entry into the market of communicating directly with citizens, something reflected in the tendency of many papers to improve their websites with video material.

A third, more general issue can arise if what you produce proves successful and you have to decide if you are going to adapt output to take account of the preferences of viewers. A reasonable principle can pose serious questions for parliaments as they try to broaden the range of coverage they offer. A representative of the Greek Parliament television channel pointed out the dilemma as follows:

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4 Quoted in a paper on "Lok Sabha television – opportunities and challenges", presented at the Conference on Broadcasting of Parliamentary Business through Dedicated TV Channels and Public Broadcasting Systems held in Geneva in October 2006

"Our broadcasts cover more than parliamentary sessions and sub-committees, and include many documentaries on world history and culture. A few months ago, one of our viewers called to say he found the documentary very interesting but was bored by the parliament proceedings. His comment was: "Why do you have the parliamentary channel? Take it out, we only want the documentary!" I replied that parliament was the reason for our existence but he said it was boring!" (IPU – EBU – ASGP (2007) p.19)

Such a difficulty is certainly less acute in a web setting where the viewer can choose but it still poses the difficulty of deciding how to respond to viewer preferences. This brings us to the last area of controversy, namely the place of a parliamentary institution in the internet age, when interactivity has assumed such considerable importance.

Managing interactivity

One of the requirements laid down in the call for tender for the contents of the webTV channel was the inclusion of interactivity. It was not considered enough for the Parliament to be able to communicate with European citizens, they had also to be able to speak back and to give their own view on what was said to them. In the longer term, this may prove to be one of the areas where the institution will have to adapt most if the webTV channel is not only going to have to please its own masters but also the viewing public. They will expect more than simply good, well-balanced programmes. The internet may in this sense prove a highly subversive force.[5]

The challenge of interactivity can be traced back to the Parliament's determination to take advantage of the web to reach a broader audience beyond the specialist. In the autumn of 2005 the new website was unveiled with this explicit aim. As indicated above, it seeks to give up-to-date, clear and comprehensible information to the general public but it is also intended to be a valuable tool for those working on European issues: officials, specialised journalists, lobbyists etc. Given the different expectations of the two groups, the site offers information at one level to citizens in their mother tongue and in a language that is designed to be easy to understand and at another provides content that is more technical and exhaustive and restricted normally to English and French.

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5 For a full discussion of the political implications of the internet, see Andrew Chadwick (2006)

Such differentiation immediately generated tension between the conflicting needs of the different users. By no means everybody was happy as a visitor to the Parliament from the United States Congress noted:

> "… the new site…was met with approval by many people outside the Parliament. However, many of the users inside the Parliament, as well as knowledgeable users outside the Parliament, complained that the new interface made it difficult to find many of the documents that were important and that had been found more readily before" (ECPRD, 2006, p.140)

In other words, the desire to broaden the reach of the website conflicted with the expectations of established users, revealing the delicate nature of the relation between generators and consumers of information. One might argue that the general public far outnumber insiders, but the closeness of the insiders to the decisions taken on the development of the system gives them a very strong voice. Indeed a number of changes were made to the site, precisely to give greater prominence on the first page where all internauts land, to certain actors and activities that were initially absent. Everyone considered that her or his activity merited a prominent place in the sun.

Similar concerns have already surfaced with the webTV project where the design of the first pages has been a subject of close scrutiny precisely because all want to be seen.   The work done so far has followed the example of the website by concentrating on the differentiation of audiences rather than distinguishing by the originator of information (political group, committee, for example) or by subject matter.   One way of confronting this tension is by employing usability testing as suggested in the ECPRD study. Such tests:

> "…provide a basis for design and change that is independent of political concerns and/or the personal preferences of a few key people. While these forces will always be a factor, such usability testing can offer a way to resolve conflicting political or personal views, and when employed early in the design process, can result in a system well-received by a large majority of its users" (ECPRD, p.142)

Usability testing can provide a means of assessing whether certain designs and formats are helpful. However, they only can go some way to determine the nature of the communication that

takes place between a parliamentary institution and the electorate. The European Parliament is not so different from other national parliaments in Europe in being faced by a rapidly changing environment and a public that is not so willing to accept gratefully whatever information a parliament may provide. The point was made as follows by a study about the communications strategy of the House of Commons in the UK prepared by the Hansard Commission:

> "…Parliament is simply not keeping pace with changes in society. So instead of the support and involvement of the public that Parliament requires, we see disengagement and cynicism, disappointing electoral turnout and low levels of satisfaction. Parliament is increasingly sidelined from the centre of British political life, with satire and neglect threatening to substitute for urgent or informed interest…
> "The public have a right to expect a Parliament which communicates its work promptly, clearly and usefully, which reaches out to all citizens and which invites participation and interaction" (Hansard Society, 2005, p.viii).

It is not necessary to accept the full charge laid at the door of the House of Commons to recognise that "participation and interaction" are becoming part of the package of growing expectations that are imposed on representative institutions. WebTV in the European Parliament is therefore not alone in having to devise a way of responding to such a demand.

Inside any institution there is always going to be strong resistance to any attempts to open up to the outside. Some opposition is technical, concerned about the security of the internal system (how will the firewall cope?) and some is organisational, linked to the difficulty of dealing with queries and questions in 23 languages (who will translate all the messages?). However, the ultimate difficulties are much more political in nature and depend on how relations with the public are perceived inside an institution. This was well reflected in the language of the 2006 Parliament resolution referred to earlier that backed two-way communication between the EU and its citizens but pointed out that:

> "…the idea of citizens becoming drivers of participation and dialogue does not seem reasonable, since it is not citizens who should seek out information, but rather information that should seek out citizens" (para.7)

It is not at all clear that such an approach makes sense. It assumes that citizens are willing to accept the role that is allocated them but in fact, they may well object.   As the former Head of the Knesset Network commented:

> "There can be no genuine dialogue between politicians or parliament and the public unless there is some criticism. … People as opposed to commercial television, are going to ask difficult questions. In some cases, it can really make a difference if you give parliamentarians or even government officials the chance to answer real questions. Let the public decide for itself. But I strongly disagree with the idea of someone editing or profiling the content so as to make it more positive. You have to have a completely transparent showcase and let the people decide for themselves, even if the outcome is negative"   (IPU – EBU – ASGP (2007) p.24)

Moreover, there are increasing ways in which citizens can put information on the net without institutional barriers. The growth of websites like Wikipedia where individuals can themselves modify entries on any topic and are only subject to the control of other visitors to the site poses a challenge to traditional institutions that is only slowly starting to emerge. It implies a loss of control that few inside any institution like the Parliament are ready to contemplate. And yet the cost of not joining in such a world is to be excluded from the conversation that is taking place. Hence it is hard to see how any institution can ultimately resist the pressure to find answers to such questions.

In this sense the webTV project can be seen as much more than an efficient and relatively inexpensive means of passing a message about how the Parliament works or even as a tool for reflecting the range of views that exist that exist in a parliamentary institution.   It can also be perceived as having potential for inviting European citizens to participate in a more network-based democracy. This implies a substantial move away from a hierarchical conception of providing information but it is the kind of world that the webTV project can and is likely to be compared with. The lines of future controversy about communicating Europe are being drawn through the move towards initiatives like webTV.

Conclusion

At the time of writing the fate of the Parliament's webTV initiative is not known and cannot be predicted with any certainty. Much will depend on the quality of the product - both in technical and content terms – that is presented to MEPs in the autumn of this year. The result will partly be a product of whether the idea has come at the right time. Brian Lamb, the founder of C-SPAN, has pointed out that his channel was created because of certain favourable circumstances that no longer exist today:

> "We started C-SPAN in the days when there were only a few private networks and now there are about 260. If you tried to start C-SPAN today, you couldn't. There wouldn't be room for it on cable systems; cable companies wouldn't want it and they wouldn't pay for it. When we came along, it was all luck. Cable was new and they were looking for new ideas, and we had an idea that didn't cost much" (IPU-EBU-ASGP (2007) p.10)

Whether webTV has arrived at the right time or not, the decision will not be neutral in its effects. It will point to the kind of institution the Parliament wants to become and will itself influence the future shape of relations between MEPs and the European electorate. Establishing a webTV structure will influence how the institution behaves, as much as a decision not to do so. Either choice poses risks and will impact on how the institution is perceived by others, including you. So keep your eyes on www.europarltv.europa.eu!

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