



EU Speakers' Conference

Stockholm, 14-15 May 2010

Background note:

New technologies and communication
channels – challenges for parliaments

Technical developments in society can facilitate greater public participation and involvement. Over the last few years, traditional channels of communication have been supplemented with new channels such as Facebook, blogs and Twitter – for those who are willing and able to use them. The aim of the discussion in this part of the meeting is to exchange experiences and to discuss issues relating to new forms of communication and their impact on parliaments. The debate will be introduced by H.E. Matthew W. Barzun, U.S. Ambassador to Sweden, and Professor Åke Grönlund. The following discussion will address such issues as increased use of social media, the challenges and opportunities that these new forms of communication give in contacts with the public, and how our democratic systems can be developed using these new communication channels.

Public confidence in parliaments and traditional political work in political parties is falling, as are election turnouts, as seen in the most recent elections to the European Parliament. This, in turn, is leading to weakened legitimacy for our representative assemblies. This discussion is not new. A concept that is increasingly mentioned in the debate on ways in which to vitalise democracy is that of discursive democracy or deliberative democracy. And the importance of social media was of course demonstrated in connection with the latest presidential elections in the USA.

Technical developments can help politicians and citizens to communicate in new – direct – ways. These developments also mean that new arenas are emerging for political work and expressions of opinion. The question of new media and their impact on parliaments affects all of us, irrespective of constitutional system.

Ambassador Barzun was involved in Barack Obama's election campaign in the 2008 presidential elections and has many years of experiences as an Internet entrepreneur. Åke Grönlund is Professor of Information Science at Örebro University in Sweden, and a leading researcher in the field of e-participation and electronic government.

Examples of issues to address

- What impact do increased elements of direct democracy have on representative democracy?
- What impact does increased use of social media have on the work of parliaments?
- What current developments are there in various parliaments?
- What opportunities for contacts between citizens and MPs, and between citizens and parliaments as institutions, does new technology create?
- How can new technology/social media be used in the work of parliament?
- Have new forms of communication created unrealistic expectations among the public as regards feedback and influence?

- What approach should parliaments as institutions take to the increased use of social media?
- Is this at all an issue for our parliaments or more an issue for the political parties/politicians themselves?

Visualisation of new communication channels

At the Conference of Speakers, a few parliaments will show and demonstrate various examples of how they use new channels of communication at a number of stations. This will provide an opportunity to examine and obtain information about the various parliaments' ways of using new technologies.

Follow the conference on Twitter via #eusc2010. To contribute, include #eusc2010 in your Tweet. You can also follow the discussion on the Swedish Parliament's website and directly from the conference.

Annex

Vocabulary

Below follows a selection of the most common words, concepts and services in the field of new communication channels and social media. Sources include Wikipedia.

An API or Application Programming Interface is a set of instructions that enables a software program to communicate with other software.

Bambuser is a service that enables anyone to stream live video clips from their mobile phone or computer.

Blog is a contraction of the term “web log” and is a website containing regularly published commentaries and/or diary notations, usually from an individual user. The entries are normally displayed in reverse-chronological order.

Deliberative/discursive democracy is a democratic system that relies on the role of discussion and communication to develop and strengthen democracy.

E-democracy links digital technology and democracy, primarily through the use of ICT such as the Internet. Early interpretations of e-democracy often involved improving democratic and communicative processes, often limited to contacts between politicians and citizens. Concrete forms of e-democracy include electronic consultations, elections and votes.

E-participation can be defined as ICT-supported participation in processes concerning governance, decision-making and policy making. It can be seen as a form of e-democracy.

Facebook is a social networking website that connects people with friends and other contacts.

Flickr is a service that enables users to upload digital images and video films in private or public photo albums. It also serves as a social network where users can take part in discussion groups or comment on photos and video clips.

RSS or Rich Site Summary is used to publish frequently updated works such as blog entries or news headlines in a standardised format. An RSS document, which is called a feed, stream or channel, includes full or summarised text, together with a link to the original source. This is known as syndication.

Social bookmarking is a method for storing, organising and managing bookmarks to web pages and “tagging” them with keywords. It is also commonly known as social tagging, as users save keywords for web pages on social bookmarking pages, such as Delicious or Digg. These bookmarks can be saved privately, shared within a specific group or made publically available, and later be viewed by category or tag, or via a search engine.

Syndication is a form of service that enables users to fetch and reuse contents in various formats from different sources, thus making them more accessible. Such services are, for example, intended for users wishing to develop their own applications using contents from different websites. Formats can include XML and JSON.

A **tag** is a keyword or term assigned to a piece of information, such as an Internet bookmark, digital image or computer file. The tag helps to describe an item and allows it to be found again by browsing or searching.

Twitter is a communication service that enables users to send and read messages (“tweets”) of up to 140 characters. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website or SMS (text message).

Wikipedia is a multilingual, Internet-based encyclopaedia with a free and open content, which is developed by its users. Wikipedia is run by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation, supported by the Free Software Foundation. The project is based on the Mediawiki software, which is free for all and based on open source codes. Today, Wikipedia contains articles in more than 250 languages.

YouTube is a website enabling users to upload, share and view video clips.