

Ministers of parliament and information and communication technologies as a means of horizontal and vertical communication in western europe

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Abstract. The analysis in this article focuses on the vertical and horizontal communication patterns of MPs, drawing on examples from a comparative survey done in seven European countries. The results show that the MPs in these countries can still be said to be in an initial phase of exploiting the full range of these new technologies to support their parliamentary and partisan activity, and that traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers are still the favoured means for political communication. In so far as ICT is used, MPs primarily use these means for internal communication within the party or within parliament, and not very much for external communication with constituents, journalists, lobbyists, etc. Analysing the use of homepages and political campaign via ICT both of these means are seen to be largely dependent on the political party of the MP, and the party's electoral strategies, limiting individual initiatives by MPs. Also, a certain disinterest in a more extensive use of ICT on the part of the MPs was found. There seem to be a number of reasons for this disinterest, among these the argument that there is still a considerable digital divide especially in the Southern European countries. However, as computer and Internet diffusion continues to increase rapidly this argument becomes increasingly invalid.

1. ICTs as a means of access to the transmission of information

This article, which is based primarily upon responses from Portuguese MPs, examines the effective use of the Internet in their parliamentary work, followed by a detailed analysis of ICTs as a means of access and transmission of information and a method of horizontal and vertical communication.

Analysing ICT tools as a means for communication, e-mail (electronic mail) is of greatest use by those surveyed in contrast to chatrooms that are used the least. Table 1 shows that while e-mail use varies from 56.4% in Portugal to 95% in the Netherlands, in all cases it is the most highly used ICT form.¹ Next, in terms of ICT use as a means to access information, surfing on the World Wide Web (WWW) is more common than the use of Intranet ranging from a Portuguese low of 46.2% to a German high of 89.7%. Scotland is an exception in that its high use of Intranet (89.2%) supercedes its WWW figures of 70.8%.

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¹Germany is an exception in that its 89.7 percent use figure is identical to WWW use.

Table 1
Frequency of ICT use in parliamentary work (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| E-mail | 56 | 81 | 94 | 95 | 92 | 94 | 90 |
| Newsgroups/discussion groups | 3 | 4 | 10 | 11 | 11 | 22 | 4 |
| Chatrooms | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | – | 3 |
| Personal Homepage | 5 | 18 | 15 | 27 | 40 | 28 | 63 |
| World Wide Web (www) | 46 | 69 | 66 | 71 | 78 | 71 | 90 |
| Intranet | 31 | 54 | 54 | 44 | 42 | 89 | 88 |

Note: The percentages do not total 100% because the reading of the table is limited to each category in the column.

Regarding the Intranet,² the figures range from a low in Portugal of 30.8% to a Scottish high of 89.2%. Similarly, Portugal also scored the lowest regarding MP personal webpages to present themselves and communicate with other Internet users (5.1%, i.e., fifteen deputies) as compared to the highest scorer, Germany a very high 63.2%.³ Participation in discussion groups range from a Portuguese low of 2.6% to a Scottish high of 21.6%. Chatrooms, the least used of the ICTs across the board, ranged from the Dutch and Norwegian zero use to a German high of 2.9%.⁴

This emphasis in the informative component is still not accompanied by an effective and intensive use of ICTs as a means of communication as verified by the MPs canvassed in this study. And as a means for reaching out to others, these technologies are used more for communicating internally (horizontally – with the party and/or with assistants) than externally (vertically – with voters, political institutions and groups and other representative bodies, authorities, parties, associations, lobby groups, etc.). Therefore, external communication with constituents shows lower figures because surveyed MPs consider communication with other political agents more important than with voters/citizens.

In the face of this greater use of ICTs for information research to the detriment of communication with constituents, an interviewed Portuguese Socialist Party deputy confirmed the current limited use of ICTs for communication, which partially depends on the age and goals of the different deputies. On the other hand, the legislative aid to the Portuguese Communist Party's Parliamentary Group links the low use of communication to the need for physical contact with the varied agents or the "human factor", because personal relations are essential.

"It is perfectly natural that the computer serves to hold documentation, exchange information, exchange reports, exchange messages, exchange points of view, exchange amendments, exchange proposals, but that I, to make a certain decision, do not omit human contact and the need to meet with A, B, or C to take that decision".⁵

According to Portuguese interviewed deputies, the majority confirm that they use the Internet in a non-individual fashion for political campaigning while included on party lists, given that,

"... it is not a personalized system ... that it is not a system that gives protagonism to the deputies" (Portuguese Social Democrat deputy in charge of Information Society for the government and behind the forum "The Internet and the Future of Democracy").

²Defined as a server accessible only for internal communication in legislatures for the members of parliament to access certain specific information.

³The definition of the personal page in this study is a proactive process in terms of initiative in its construction and the page contents, whether a page within the parliamentary system or on an external server. It must also be observed that some parliamentary institutions differentiate the access of MP's to the Intranet and WWW as others tend to integrate both under the same technology and interface.

⁴Scottish figures were not available for this category.

⁵This PCP view is reinforced by additional interviews discussed in Cunha et al (2003) and Cunha (2002).

Table 2
Personal homepages (%)

| PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|
| 28 | 30 | 29 | 14 | 50 | – | 72 |

Table 3
Reasons to maintain a personal homepage (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|
| Personal Initiative | 39 | 66 | 32 | 64 | 24 | – | 57 |
| Cooperation with parliamentary group | 31 | 60 | 58 | 44 | – | – | 10 |
| Cooperation with interest or other organizations | 14 | 28 | 12 | 5 | 1 | – | 3 |
| Cooperation with national party organization | 8 | 46 | 40 | 16 | 19 | – | 10 |
| Cooperation with web content firm | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6 | – | – | 21 |
| Cooperation with parliamentary administration | 6 | 20 | 45 | 30 | – | – | 6 |
| Cooperation with non-national party organizations | 3 | 30 | 22 | 11 | 5 | – | – |

Note: The percentages do not total 100% because the reading of the table is limited to each category in the column.

According to a newly elected Portuguese Popular Party (CDS-PP) deputy (Ninth Legislature), the parties with candidate lists for the legislative elections maintain the pages on the Internet where they publicize the campaign initiatives, program, news, etc. From his perspective, for campaign purposes, the pages are very effective for a great reason: the direct transmission of information to the citizens, without passing via journalist mediation that, generally, waste pertinent information, selecting only certain news that they consider relevant. But neither the party, individual, nor Parliamentary Groups pages are very well-developed or current, except during election time "... because it is an additional dividend in the electoral campaign." According to Voerman and Cunha [25],

... elections not only stimulate the initial creation of Web sites but are also key factors in their redesign and. In Portugal, as elections approach, during campaigns, and immediately after, the larger parties keep their sites very current. Between elections, however, the sites are neglected and become stale".

The exception in Portugal are parties of the left (Portuguese Communist Party and Left Bloc-BE) which have a tendency to maintain current sites, to the extent that it constitutes an alternative privileged form of communication to the traditional means of social communication.

As to the existence of MP individual personal pages, in Portugal only 27.5% of those surveyed had one focused on their parliamentary activity. But the deputies surveyed that have a personal page, a result of personal initiative or cooperation with the parliamentary group; see them as useful or very useful for their parliamentary work (Tables 2 and 3). The data deepen analyses regarding weak involvement by the political parties in the development of technological skills of their electoral list deputies.⁶ On the other hand, it suggests some involvement of the parliamentary administration in the creation of personal pages for the deputies in their benches, even if the level is clearly insufficient.

As MPs become 'information agents' meaning that they are much more active in creating information and news than before, they also have to change their time management, because creating information themselves is time consuming. But many seem to think that it is worth the effort and one of the interviewed MP's even thinks that this is beneficial for his work on the Parliamentary floor.

The MP's who have homepages typically have a presentation of themselves (CV) and their political views or visions, press releases, talks, articles, and newsletters on the homepage. Some also have debates

⁶See Elvebakk in this issue.

on their homepage; most often related to their political field of specialization. The tendency is that MP's who have personal homepages put everything they publish on the page. There seem to be two reasons for this 'all out' strategy. One is that it is a way for the MP to document his/her parliamentary work. The other is that it creates around their own work and the work in Parliament:

"The philosophy is that it is a way to document your (parliamentary, JH) work"... "everything gets posted (on the homepage; JH)"

"but it also creates an openness, so that people can click in and see everything about what we are really working with" (JK).

While the individual MP's who have personal homepages (with personal domains) have more or less explicit strategies on how to use their homepage, only one of the parties in Parliament, namely the Social democratic Party, has an explicit strategy for the uses of the MP's personal homepages and the party's homepage, and for the relationship between the two. The strategy is that all Social democratic MP's have (get) a standard homepage which is generated 'automatically'. The individual MP can then, if he/she wishes to, expand it, add new features, etc. (Some have personal homepages with their own domain besides that. This is not considered a problem.) The party homepage is then dedicated to political news, newsletters, articles, some information from MP's and MEP's, permanent debates on various topics, information about the party, a member's service, and a special service for pupils/students. From fall 2000, when the new homepage strategy was implemented, campaign themes were added to the party homepage. These are current political themes running for a month at a time connected with short chats (one hour) with prominent and well-known Social democrats. This functional division of work between MP homepages and the party homepage, plus the offensive party homepage strategy seem to have worked very well...

"we ... wanted to see if it affected the way in which you are able to set a political agenda through the [conventional] media. And now after we have had an evaluation I can say for sure that it has had a visible effect" (LJ).

This way of thinking about ICT seems to be connected with parties with a 'grass root' orientation, which tend to emphasise the deliberative aspects of democracy associated with a 'neo-republican democracy model' [19].

Overall, with the exception of Denmark and Germany, this low use of individual pages by the parliamentarians finds complementary data in various international studies such as Zittel (2001) that analysed the sites of the United States congress and German and Swedish parliaments. The study was conducted in January 2000 with the author showing that while in the American congress the sites at all legislative levels are used almost 100%, the German and Swedish commissions hardly use their sites, and only a minority of their members has personal pages.

Overall, the data presented here questions the degree to which we can address the difference between different parliaments just on political systems, like in Zittel's study [27], that analysed the sites of the United States congress and German and Swedish parliaments. The study was conducted in January 2000 with the author showing that while in the American congress the sites at all legislative levels are used almost 100%, the German and Swedish commissions hardly use their sites, and only a minority of their members had personal pages. According to Zittel, the greater development of personal webpages by United States congressman mirrors a difference between parliamentary systems (Germany and Sweden) and presidential systems (USA). As a result, this study concludes that parliamentary systems do not provide sufficient incentives for the legislators to focus on their constituents and to structure a formative participatory representational process. This is a result of parliaments having the power to create or overturn governments, in this way imposing a rigid discipline on parliamentary majorities and forcing

the individual representatives to concentrate on internal negotiation. To the contrary, because they do not possess this function, the presidential system opens more space for representatives to establish a relationship closer to their constituents and to make personal political affirmations in the public sphere. The conclusion, therefore, is that,

“... electronic parliaments will not automatically push towards electronic democracy. Institutional context matters and each parliament will rather react to technological change in line with the larger institutional structure it is situated in” [27].

But since 2000 our data shows a positive evolution in the same or similar countries, with 72.1% for Germany and 50% for Denmark. Should we not then also consider other arguments for justifying differences, namely time and dissemination of Internet use, probably combined with some other institutional constraints that originate more from electoral systems and parliament's organizational structure than from the characteristics of Presidential versus Parliamentary systems?

From a comparative perspective, then, Portuguese deputies limited use of ICTs, with the exception of Chatrooms, stands out when compared to the data set of other European nations in this study. In terms of the most used aspect (E-mail at 56.4%), Portugal is significantly behind Austria, the next lowest with 81.3% use. And in terms of the next most used ICTs, WWW and Intranet, Portugal is also significantly behind. Also noteworthy is the high Scottish and German Intranet use, 89.2% and 88.2%, respectively; German and Danish personal homepage use, 63.2% and 40.4%; and the Scottish Discussion group use of 21.6%. Clearly MPs are embracing some aspects of ICTs.

2. ICTs as a means of horizontal (internal) and vertical (external) communication

The claim that monological media (for example, radio and television) place obstacles for public participation, whereas the new media (like the Internet) possesses characteristics inherently dialogical, democratic, and libertarian, which permit the return to political communication with the citizens and a concretisation of a “real deliberation.” Nevertheless, even with networks of vast and broadened communication,

“... there is no automatically democratic character to the new media; democratic practice must be established within political culture, not depended upon as if it were an inevitable property of a technological package.”[8].

If we accept ICT potentialities and restrictions as a means of communication between the different political agents, these communicational processes permitted by the new media may be categorized as either horizontal (internal) communication with other politicians and decision makers, or vertical (external) communication with citizens, journalists, and other agents, via e-mail, forums, chat rooms, newsgroups, or mailing-lists.

The most used communication tool at all levels, e-mail, is often resorted to by the Portuguese deputies surveyed (56.4% use it frequently or permanently – Table 1) for either horizontal or vertical contact. In this manner, e-mail is a tool consulted daily (73.8%), even though the surveyed tend to respond more to e-mails received posing concrete questions and/or requests for information or material (58.8%).⁷ The role played by ICTs as a means of communication is also demonstrated in the daily high volume use of e-mail, numbering between ten and fifty e-mails received weekly by half of those surveyed.

⁷This data is not portrayed in table form here but is compiled from the original survey.

Table 4

Contents of received e-mails (scaled 1 to 11, where 11 is the most frequent issue raised and 1 the least frequent)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|
| General political and national issues | 7 | 9 | – | 8 | 9 | 3 | 10 |
| Party issues | 6 | 8 | – | 8 | 8 | 4 | 7 |
| National political issues related to MPs area of expertise | 6 | 9 | – | 9 | – | – | – |
| Public questions/feedback/criticism | 5 | 6 | – | 8 | 7 | 4 | 8 |
| Local/regional political issues dealing with MPs electoral district | 4 | 7 | – | 7 | 6 | 2 | 7 |
| Contacts with Media | 4 | 6 | – | 6 | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Information/material requests | 4 | 4 | – | 6 | 4 | – | 5 |
| Lobbyists | 3 | 6 | – | 7 | 6 | 3 | 8 |
| Advertisements | 3 | 4 | – | 4 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Insults | 2 | 2 | – | 3 | 3 | 7 | 4 |
| Other | 2 | 2 | – | 3 | – | 1 | 3 |

Table 5

E-mail origins (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|-------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Voters/Public | 21 | 14 | 14 | 21 | 21 | 19 | 20 |
| Personal Staff | 18 | 22 | 20 | 14 | 14 | 13 | 16 |
| Party Colleagues | 15 | 10 | 16 | 22 | 17 | – | 12 |
| Interest Groups | 15 | 12 | 20 | 17 | 10 | 20 | 13 |
| Party Organization | 12 | 22 | 19 | 10 | 13 | 11 | 11 |
| Government/ Bureaucracy | 11 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 16 | 13 |
| Press/Journalists | 8 | – | 5 | 4 | 11 | 14 | – |
| MPs | – | – | – | – | – | 7 | – |

The contents of received e-mails (Table 4) deal mainly with the activity of those surveyed: national political issues (6.9%), parliamentary issues (5.9%), and national political issues in the area of the deputies' specialization (5.5%), which shows an integration of ICTs into work routines of the daily performance of parliamentary work.

To a certain degree, the largest number of received e-mails regarding national, in comparison to local/regional political issues, can be explained by the Portuguese parliamentary electoral procedure. In the absence of single-member districts, the elected deputies are constitutionally considered representatives of the voters in general, and not particularly connected to their districts.

Regarding vertical communication, e-mails dealing with questions/feedback/public criticisms stand out (a Dutch high of 7.9% ranging to a Scottish low of 4.3%, with most nations in the 4.3 to 5.3 range), which is confirmed by the origins of e-mails (Table 5), given that the public sends a significant number of e-mails to the deputies in some of these nations. While 21.3% of surveyed deputies' volume in Portugal is the high, similar figures exist for Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The lows in this origin are for Austria and Norway with 13.6% and 13.7% respectively. Therefore, the sum of the e-mails referenced to internal communication – those originating from personal staff, party colleagues, and party headquarters - total from the German 38.2% to the Norwegian 53.6% of received e-mails,⁸ which confirms the predominance of horizontal communication when compared to vertical.

It is noteworthy that media contacts are also beginning to use ICTs as a means of communication with those surveyed. In fact, e-mails from other organizations – interest groups, bureaucracy/government, and press/journalists – are also frequently received by the deputies (the three categories total 29.8% in

⁸The Scottish figure of 24.2 percent is not included here because party colleague e-mails were not measured.

Table 6

Stimulus resulting from received e-mails (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Frequent | 6 | 14 | 33 | 2 | 19 | 37 | 0 |
| Often | 29 | 26 | 55 | 32 | 34 | 52 | 15 |
| Sometimes | 55 | 50 | 9 | 57 | 37 | 6 | 62 |
| Rarely/Never | 10 | 8 | 3 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 22 |

Note: The percentages do not include the categories 'don't know' or 'no answer'.

Table 7

Usefulness of received e-mails (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Frequent | 8 | 16 | 42 | 0 | — | 81 | 2 |
| Often | 16 | 38 | 54 | 27 | — | 11 | 32 |
| Sometimes | 63 | 41 | 2 | 62 | — | 4 | 43 |
| Rarely/Never | 13 | 3 | 2 | 11 | — | 1 | 22 |

Note: The percentages do not include the categories 'don't know' or 'no answer'.

Denmark to 49.6% in Scotland).⁹

Noticing a weak implementation of vertical communication channels (mainly with the public) by the surveyed, the question necessarily returns to the degree of impact of the information received by the deputies, especially via e-mail, in influencing their parliamentary decision-making. The surveys' indication corresponds to the self-perception on the part of those canvassed regarding the stimulus and utility of e-mail. The majority of those surveyed in Austria, Portugal, Netherlands, and Germany (Table 6) only considered received e-mail a stimulus at times (ranging from 50% to 61.8%) while the Danes, Norwegians, and Scots considered them much more useful (the "frequent" and "often" total 52.8%, 87.5%, and 89.3% respectively). It is not unusual, therefore, that Norwegians and Scots¹⁰ found e-mail especially useful ("frequent" or "often" total 95.3% and 92.8%) when compared to the other nations for their parliamentary work, though only a minority totalled them (Table 7). This low attention to opinions formulated by other agents in some nations confirms that access to more direct communication between deputies and those interacting with them in the communicative process does not automatically lead to greater exchange, making it necessary to take into account the contents of the communications and the value placed on them by the recipients of those nations.

As a second communicative tool, participation in debates and electronic fora (Table 8), organized by varied social communication entities or by the institutions and politicians themselves, is hotly discussed and analysed in the deliberation regarding digital democracy. Nevertheless, only a minority of surveyed deputies participate in discussion fora (Portuguese 18.8 and Dutch 13.6%).¹¹ According to one CDS-PP deputy, in pro-active terms, Portuguese deputies are not inclined to participate in fora or chats; in reactive terms (if they are invited), there is always a group of deputies, but in diminished numbers, that find themselves "able to handle those new forms of debate."

In particular, the criticism they most often connect to the fora is that the online discussions are dominated by certain individuals or groups with their own agendas. According to a BE deputy who has participated in "live fora" at the request of journalists, the participants,

⁹Neither Germany nor Austria are included because they did not measure the Press/Journalist sector.

¹⁰The Danes were not measured in this area.

¹¹The other nations did not provide data in this area.

Table 8

Personal use of ICTs (%)

| | PT | AU | NR | NL | DK | S | G |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Personal | 53 | 14 | 48 | 34 | 39 | 46 | 6 |
| Someone else | 10 | 31 | 3 | 3 | 10 | 70 | 52 |
| Both | 35 | 54 | 49 | 62 | 48 | — | 41 |

Note: The percentages do not include the categories 'don't know' or 'no answer'.

“... seemed totally uninterested ... with a participation of quasi-addicts, of people that were certainly respectable but with ten or twenty frenetic message senders of the type sent on mobile phones of three words that lined up one after another awaiting my response, with 20, 40, or 50 arriving per minute. ... this does not have any deepness or rationality for political debate; it is more a small journalistic happening for limited circles ...”

These results of a deficient vertical communication between deputies and other political agents, especially the public, were deepened in the interviews which presented related justifications, or the imperfect functioning of the AR in terms of supporting the use of ICTs, or the public's weak affinity or limited resources.

In effect, similar to British MPs that use e-mail more for internal rather than constituent communication (Coleman 2000), the Portuguese deputies interviewed justify the situation claiming the deluge of requests, whether via e-mail, letter, telephone, or fax, and the limited support provided by the AR in adapting to ICTs. This situation is confirmed by another interviewed PS deputy that related the low regular contact with the electorate with the lack of administrative support in the AR, given that, “... a deputy that positions himself, in direct contact with the universe of the electorate, well, risks being inundated with a bunch of communications ...” Consequently, this deputy warns of the potential problems of frustration by the public in the face of deputies incapacity to respond, that is, “the public's illusion, that directly contacts the deputy via e-mail and that the deputy has the ability to manage all the ... communication received, handled, and responded to ...”

In the case of the Portuguese parliament, communication via e-mail is considerably centralized in the Parliamentary Groups (PGs), given that a significant amount of the external communication to the deputies is handled by the PG (that is, by the office of PG support including secretaries, aids, etc.), being “... an additional way of making contact, on the part of the public, with the PGs themselves.” (CDS-PP deputy) As a paradigmatic example, this situation presents itself as a general rule of the PCP PG that never makes available the personal e-mails of its deputies. With the exception of the Austrian, and especially German MPs, (Table 8) most of the other nations also register a big percentage of e-mail handling by the individual MP, although they also responded that others offered considerable assistance.

E-mail from the public to Portuguese MPs gives rise to the common complaint that it is generally unthoughtful. On one side, the PCP aid considers e-mail as an additional communication method for Internet users, easy to use, less onerous, and nicer, where people place their problems, complaints, and comments. But, on the other side, a large portion of the e-mails are commentaries which lack elaboration and are written without much thought, partly because of the facility of sending an e-mail.

Therefore, the criticism which was most elaborated by interviewed deputies regarding the public had to do with its passivity, weak participation, and lack of political culture. According to a new PSD deputy, the lack of routine contact with the deputies by the public led to the current situation of weak interactivity, where ... the problem is that the electorate are not yet very used to going to a parliamentary site and finding the deputy's e-mail, so I think there is still a lack of communication from that point of

view . . . This criticism of the distance between the public and its elected representatives has another side substantiated by Cabral's (1997) data that, through an index that combined the subjective dimension (the capacity felt to influence the country's evolution) with an objective dimension (participation measured by membership in civic associations), found that 85% of the population is situated in the two scales (1 to 5) of the greatest distance from power. As a result, ". . . no recourse appears to be as badly distributed, in Portuguese society, as 'power,' or better, perhaps, citizenship" (idem: 146).

All things considered, the deputies' criticism of a deficit of public participation does not take into account the particular conditions of the Portuguese political system which does not facilitate proximity between the political representatives and the electorate. Given that the law does not force the deputies to live in the district from which they are elected, intensified by the proportional representation system, "[the] Portuguese system does not favour an identification between the deputy and electoral circuits, given that the identity is defined in relation to the party"[16]. In fact, the independence of the deputies regarding the electorate liberates them from any effective responsibility to the latter, except in the loyalty to their PG, leading toward the partyization of the parliamentary mandate.

The weak civic participation highlighted by interviewed deputies is also strengthened, from their perspective, in the camp of ICTs because of the tardy Internet expansion in Portugal. One of the new PSD deputies felt that there was a serious problem in Portugal regarding access to the Internet, according to whom in the face of low Internet use statistics ". . . it is normal that there is not . . . much appetite or vocation on the part of politicians when at a certain point the skill training to be on line are lacking . . .".

As a result, according to the official statistical sources of the Observatório das Ciências e das Tecnologias, in its last Survey of Portuguese Population Use of ICT (2001),¹² almost half of the Portuguese used a computer (49%), and almost one third used the Internet (30.3%), data which places Portugal in second to last place in the European statistics.¹³

In contrast to certain idealizations of digital democracy, there remains a central problem of accessibility to ICTs and, consequently, to new dominions and space for intervention and political participation. To have the usufruct of these spaces, the individuals have to possess minimal, basic technological conditions – computer, internet connection via a telephone or digital line, free time, and a level of literacy that enable adequate expressive and linguistic capacities. Consequently, a participatory public does not depend only on larger and better access to information and communication, but also to an alteration of living conditions, without which individuals will not be apt to exercise their political rights and obligations.

Notwithstanding the finding of a defective politics by the Portuguese public and of low levels of Internet access, there are paradigmatic examples of new social movements, more or less structured, that seek out ICTs to diffuse and establish opinion currents and action with an increasing number of participants.

An example of that participation and of citizen involvement via ICTs is the experience of GUIA/PASIG (Portuguese Accessibility Special Interest Group). Between 1998 and 2001 (www.accessibilidade.net) this advocacy group for deficient rights was able to unleash an effective campaign with its online accessibility as its main activity. It used the Internet as an instrument of protest and mobilization, expanding via mailing lists and discussion groups until it formulated the first electronic petition in Portugal, as well as Europe. As a result, GUIA/PASIG pressured for the alteration of the right to

¹²Portugal na Sociedade da Informação (Ministério da Ciência e da Tecnologia, 2001). <http://www.si.mct.pt/file?src=1&mid=1137&bid=868>; Sociedade da Informação – Principais indicadores estatísticos 1995–2001 (Observatório das Ciências e das Tecnologias, Ministério da Ciência e da Tecnologia, Março 2002). <http://www.si.mct.pt/file?src=1&mid=1135&bid=867>.

¹³Sociedade da Informação – Principais indicadores estatísticos 1995–2001 (Observatório das Ciências e das Tecnologias, Ministério da Ciência e da Tecnologia, Março 2002). <http://www.si.mct.pt/file?src=1&mid=1135&bid=867>.

petition and for the recognition of signatures that were collected electronically in Portugal, especially via its electronic petition later sent to Parliament, resulting in recommendations, directives, and action proposals in the area of rights for the disabled [7].

From all of the justifications analysed relative to the predominance of horizontal communication over vertical, we generally synthesize a non-declared resistance in Portugal, on the part of politicians and the traditional political institutions, to the influence of new forms of political information and communication, to the extent that they attribute the communication failures with the public to external factors and their practices. And the MPs of other nations/region analysed here appear to have similar views.

Consequently, even with the opening of direct channels to responsible politicians, that does not signify interactivity and a related increase in responsabilization, taking into account the resistance of the traditional logic of the functioning of the political structures themselves. Effectively, the forms of relationships and the challenge between the electorate and elected are still found to be entwined in a unidirectional political communication without open and appellant debates, which only now begin to appeal to the potentiality of new technologies (and mainly based on e-mail exchanges).

3. Conclusion

Framed in a more general perspective of horizontal/vertical communication, this analysis focused on practices and examples from selected West European MPs in terms of ICT use for the transmission of information and the exchange of ideas with other political agents. In general outlines, the results obtained characterize that the deputies are still in an initial phase of exploitation of the full range of these new technologies to support their parliamentary and partisan activity, in the measure that privileged traditional media (television, radio, and newspapers) are still favoured for political communication. Concretely, in its restricted use of ICTs, MPs concentrate primarily on internal communication (between deputies of the same party and/or with the party structure), especially via e-mail, and not so much on external communication with constituents. In addition, respecting the divulgence of political information, the on-line pages and the political campaign via ICTs are largely dependent on the party and its electoral strategies, limiting individual initiatives by the deputies. In the end, a strong resistance to seriously considering electronic public participation, whether via e-mail or online forums, was unveiled for varied reasons enunciated by Portuguese deputies: the incapacity to respond to the volume of requests; the uninteresting messages sent by the public because of weak political culture; and the problem of Internet access that restricts its use by much of the population.

In fact, a certain disinterest is verified on the part of the deputies in the new communicative technologies potential, for reasons that may be centered on internal (parliamentary structure, electoral system, party system, and parliamentary political culture) as well as external parliamentary factors (media systems, general political culture, and social diffusion of ICTs).

For Portugal, in the area of external factors, the media systems are characterized in alliances between telecommunication businesses, newspapers, radio, and television that tend to emit the same content traditionally or on the Internet that belong to the same group. In this manner, ICT use by the deputies to find/disperse information and to communicate with other political agents does not encounter significant dividends in comparison to traditional media given the provision of content and elevated audience of the latter. In effect, the introduction and adoption of the Internet in Portugal is still relatively low in relation to other European Union nations, which certainly constitutes a strong argument used by Portuguese deputies when asked regarding their low ICT use. MP views can be down-played if one considers that the largest daily newspapers in Portugal have a daily press run under 100,000 copies, and that in a

population of ten million there are three million Internet users, leaving space to imagine opportunities in the search for new relationships between deputies and the public.

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