Chapter 4
Communication and Documentation on Parliamentary Websites:
The Topics of Parliamentary Business on the Website of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a new section of the parliamentary website of the Italian Chamber of Deputies launched in November 2009 "Temi dell'attività parlamentare." In this section, parliamentary records, research material, and hyperlinks to a variety of external information sources are integrated in a unified digital resource structured according to topical indexes. The new website's section has been conceived as an evolution of documentation and research activities done by the internal staff of the Research Department of the Chamber of Deputies and benefits from the domain knowledge of the parliamentary documentation experts. The chapter discusses future innovation implied by the implementation of the project in the areas of institutional communication, documentation supporting legislators, and their staff internal organization. It also suggests that these innovations relate to the passage from e-government to the conceptual and operational model of "transformational government" (t-government), that emphasizes a citizen-centric delivery of public services, a shared services culture, and innovative methods in management of resources and skills in public administration.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on the relationship between internet technologies and political participation shows no sign of being resolved (Parisopoulos et al., 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). In this chapter, the description of a recent initiative undertaken by the Italian Chamber of Deputies is drawn up in a moderately optimistic vision, according to which – once some requirements are satisfied - digital information on political and parliamentary activity may improve the level of political knowledge among the citizens and represent a precondition for democratic engagement.

The need for stronger democratic engagement is acutely perceived in a country like Italy that – according to several indicators - is facing a crisis in the general level of trust in politics and in democratic institutions. Santini (2010), presenting a comparison with the *World Values Survey* (1995-1996), has consistently shown how all the indicators regarding trust in institutions in Italy are regressing; trust in political parties (WVS 17,1 ; Santini 12,2); trust in politicians (WVS 17,3; Santini 7,3); trust in Parliament (WVS 36,8; Santini 30,0). What should be noted is the very low and worrying level of trust in politicians, among the lowest registered in Europe, comparable only with the ones surveyed in the early nineties in some post-communist countries (Poland 4,7; Bulgaria 7,2) and in Portugal (7,9). But another figure worth underscoring is that – in this acute crisis of trust - Parliament maintains 30,0 which is a satisfactory level, higher than Government's (23,5), Trade Unions' (27,5) and much higher than the level of trust earned by the press (13,4) and television (11,1).

These trends are not limited to Italy, but reach many other western countries where the fall in trust in the concrete functioning of democracy is not shaking the general confidence in principles and institutions of modern representative democracies, first of all in the parliamentary institution (Gibbons, 2010; Fox, 2009). This discrepancy has been captured by other researchers: summing up the results of an investigation on political disaffection based on interviews conducted with Dutch citizens, Van Wessel (2010) affirms that "Respondents hold images of moral order about democracy, but they cannot see democracy taking shape with these images" (p. 521). In the tension between practices and images of social order that emerges from the studies on political disaffection in many contemporary democracies, the parliament seems to gain (if only potentially) a strategic advantage from representing the most classical and clear-cut image of democracy. Such trends and institutional factors (offline context, following the terminology adopted by Leston-Bandeira, 2007) should be taken into account by parliaments in adopting communication strategies and in planning the development of the parliamentary website, which necessarily has a big part in this communication strategy (Lusoli et al., 2006).

Accordingly, it is firstly from the perspective of the institutional e-communication (the communication established via the internet by the institution of parliament with citizens) that this chapter describes the concrete initiative undertaken by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, by devoting a new section of the official website to "the topics of parliamentary business," utilizing innovative search features, a less formal language and more concise and usable document formats.

Moreover, the new organization of information and data needed to accomplish the project may stimulate – and actually is stimulating among the staff of the Research Department of the Chamber of Deputies - another kind of investigation focussed on the evolution of information and documentation needs of members of parliament (MPs) and parliamentary bodies. Even in this case, the investigation involves an "offline context," that is the parliamentary role in promoting, overseeing and influencing public policies.

In more general terms, regardless of differences in constitutional systems, contemporary parliaments, both those mainly focused on legislation

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