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Cyberdemocracy: Assessing the European Parliament

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The Rochester Institute of Technology

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Cyberdemocracy: Assessing the European Parliament

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	7
The Public Sphere	7
Emergence of the Networked Public Sphere.....	9
Cyberdemocratic Interactivity.....	12
Model of Cyber-Interactivity	15
Rationale and Research Questions.....	16
Method	17
Procedure.....	17
Results and Analysis	19
Content	19
Usability	20
Transparency	21
Audience.....	22
Interactivity	23
Discussion.....	24
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research	25
References.....	27
Appendix A: Figures.....	30
Appendix B: Cyberdemocracy Website Evaluation Form.....	31

CYBERDEMOCRACY: ASSESSING THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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Abstract

New information technologies have been widely predicted to change the nature of governance. The Internet has made the ideal of cyberdemocracy more attainable as the world grows smaller and more connected. Although the ideal no longer seems so distant a destination, nagging questions remain: Where is this place? Are we there yet? How much longer? This paper evaluates the website of one of the most powerful legislatures in the world, the European Parliament, to determine where we are, how far we have come, and what remains to be done to achieve the ideal of cyberdemocracy. Five criteria are used in its assessment: content, usability, transparency, audience, and interactivity. Previous studies have operationalized these criteria in terms of features.

Keywords: cyberdemocracy, public sphere, European Parliament, civic web

Cyberdemocracy: Assessing the European Parliament

Communication scholars have debated the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet. Many tout the Internet's ability to give voice to individual opinions and allow access to valuable information (Peters & Simonson, 2004). It has departed from traditional media in promoting civic engagement and collective action. Although the Internet is typically a medium in which individuals act independently, it inspires and enables collective action. The fusion of cybersphere and democracy allows individuals more access to and direct influence within the world of politics and governance of one's country.

Cyberdemocracy is a relatively new term to the modern world, not completely understood by the public and when implemented by nations, not used to its full potential. Its most simple definition is the classic ideal of democracy facilitated by the Internet. In order to fully comprehend cyberdemocracy one must understand its counterparts. The three distinct forms of cyber-space governance include digital democracy, e-government, and cyberdemocracy. Digital democracy and e-government use 21st century technology to *promote* democracy and provide government services respectively. The presentation of information has been found to be the main feature of cyberspace governance by nations. Consequently, cyberdemocracy is an ideal that blends traditional democracy with conventional communication technologies, essentially the Internet, to *engage* the public in political decision-making, activism, and influence within a nation's political sphere and governance, mainly through interactive features provided via the Internet to its constituents.

Advocates of cyberdemocracy believe that government and political websites "should encourage interaction with government officials and provide opportunities to provide input into the decision-making process" (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2004, p. 5). In opposition to digital

democracy and e-government, cyberdemocratic websites value and promote participation and interaction rather than the presentation of information, which is useless without the capability to react and provide input or feedback (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007).

Historically, communication technologies have been deemed capable of revolutionizing politics, civic engagement, and participation in government, thus promoting the classical idea of democracy originating in Ancient Greece. In fact, various forms of traditional communication technologies have served to improve democratic governance. The printing press encouraged newspapers to disperse information to the masses; the introduction of the radio allowed individuals to listen to news, political topics, debates, and various talk shows; and the television not only allowed the masses to hear current events but to also view live and recorded material. All of these forms of communication media presented and provided access to information. However, the technology did not permit real-time interaction, yet it did allow discussion among the public. Some argue that the invention and dispersion of information through communication technologies have eroded the quality of civic discourse. Today, the Internet may be viewed as “a way to not only boost civic involvement but also to create a new civic utopia characterized by total democratic participation” (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2006, p. 388).

In 2003, Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese conducted a study on the 50 U.S. state legislature websites to examine the notion of the Internet as a service of democracy and to evaluate its role in achieving cyberdemocracy based on five criteria: content, usability, interactivity, transparency, and audience. Their criteria were modified and applied for this review to assess the level of cyberdemocracy as revealed by the European Parliament website as of the year 2014.

Literature Review

The Public Sphere

To fully understand the ideal of cyberdemocracy, the public sphere and how they promote civic engagement in a democratic society must first be examined. Present-day conceptualizations of the public sphere are based on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas as revealed in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere-An Inquiry into a Category of a Bourgeois Society*; a translation of his *Habilitationsschrift, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1989). The notion of the public sphere began in the Western European Renaissance. As democracy grew, so did citizens' need for information regarding self-governance and democracy (Randall, 2008). The public sphere found its way into society as a place in which citizens and individuals meet to debate and discuss public matters and issues. Historically, across Europe, public spheres were cultivated in the eighteenth century in coffee shops, salons, and areas of society in which people would inclusively gather and converse over concerning matters, departing from status and in the domain of the public's wellbeing (Habermas, 1989; Sassi, 2000;). From this cultivation emerged the idea of a civil society and civic participation. Civil society was seen as a dynamic, social sphere made of private institutions, citizens, organizations, and associations linked to yet separate from the state and market economy (Sassi, 2000). Traditionally, civil society was comprised of non-governmental and non-economic associations that anchored the public sphere in social communication. The idea of a civil society as a modern, non-violent political order in which the people held political authorities accountable was part of the mission to service the needs of society (Sassi, 2000).

Habermas defined the public sphere and explains his system on social thought as follows:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor (p. 27).

Simply stated, Habermas believed the public sphere was an area in social life in which individuals could come together and liberally discuss and identify societal troubles and influence political action. Habermas discussed the public sphere through a historical analysis and pointed out three criteria for a bourgeois public sphere to arise. He argues that a public sphere disregards status, is inclusive, and strives in the domain of common concern (Habermas, 1989). He also argues against the notion of private and stresses public. Ideas of private education, health, or ownership do not strive to help a community. According to Habermasian theory, the idea of public is directly related to the common world and an engaged society. Information should be public, as well as education, healthcare, and ownership to allow the formation of public opinion, access to all citizens, and debates about the rules regarding governing relations. Discussing the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, illustrating the challenging effects of commercialization, capitalism, and the rise of mass media, his idea of a public sphere encompasses individuals who are educated, own property, and are to some degree privileged with monetary resources. The public sphere serves as a domain of conversation oriented toward a realistic agreement.

Habermas and his theory have received some criticism and his position has come under attack by political theorists. Social theorist Nancy Fraser questioned the expected potentials of consensus through civil debate (Fraser, 1990; Poster, 1997). Fraser, a feminist, points out the

“gender blindness” from Habermas’ position and identifies that secondary groups are excluded from a universal public sphere; these groups consist of women and individuals from lower social statuses (Poster, 1997). She believes that it would be impossible for the entire public sphere to be inclusive and set aside status. However, Fraser claims the secondary groups form their own public spheres, also termed as “subaltern counterpublic” or counterpublics (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The public sphere has been historically regarded as a man’s domain, and Fraser argues that women had to create their own form of a public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Others have argued that to be part of the public sphere an individual does not need the education and privileges explained by Habermas. Rather, to be a participating member of the sphere, one must have interest and knowledge for the wellbeing of society (Sassi, 2000). Although the ideas surrounding the public sphere are aging, society seems to have allowed for the emergence of a diverse and more inclusive form of a public sphere through the communication medium of the Internet. One must only have access to participate, permitting Habermasian theory to fulfill the amendments proposed by the critics.

Emergence of the Networked Public Sphere

According to Benkler (2006), the public sphere is the dominant framework for thinking about the relationship between information and civic engagement. Today, society finds itself in the age of the Internet. The Internet provides a new means by which people can interact from the comfort of their own spaces. E-mail, social media websites, bulletin boards, forums, chat rooms, and other services supplied by the Internet have allowed people to interact as it augments the potential for public discourse within democratic societies (Benkler, 2006; Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2005a).

According to Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese, the Internet should serve to enhance involvement in politics with its more direct participatory capabilities (2007). Some view the Internet as a way to boost civic involvement and “to create a civic utopia characterized by total democratic participation” (Ferber et al., 2006, p. 388). Email, tracking, public forums, opinion polls, contact information, and various other Internet features presented can produce exchanges between elected government officials and citizens that are necessary for public participation in government today (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2005b). New media forums provide a venue for political discussion, exposure to differing viewpoints, and encouragement of civic participation and engagement that might not occur outside the cybersphere (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), thus establishing a fusion of the cyberworld and democracy.

According to Papacharissi (2002), certain aspects of the Internet have expanded its potential of becoming an all-encompassing public sphere. Avenues of personal expression and the promotion of citizen engagement via the Internet have aided the idea (Papacharissi, 2002). Political groups can be accessed online. Promotion of activism, both on and offline, are the consequences of online discourse taking place within an updated, inclusive public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). Scholars and those studying the Internet and civic media along with its effects must ask who are the users and for what purposes are they using it?

The Internet and its cyberdemocratic websites have become the main arena for citizen discourse and activity. The public sphere has been transformed from a public location, such as coffee shops and salons, to online forums and other places to gather virtually and discuss political matters. According to Sassi (2000), in Habermas’s language the Internet is a special kind of medium “differing from earlier modalities in the range of its applications and its impact”

(p. 89) that is changing the notions of the established public sphere. It serves as an innovation in citizen participation.

In order to have a successful public sphere, Habermas' three criteria must be fulfilled and the political websites on the Internet have the potential to fulfill them all. Through its public face of the World Wide Web, the Internet has revealed its capabilities of reviving the public sphere from a less bourgeois standpoint. If implemented correctly, cyberdemocratic government websites can include all users with access, disregard an individual's social status, and strive to address the common concerns of the public.

The undeniable advantages of the Internet and online communications do involve some pitfalls to Habermasian theory. Critics of an Internet public sphere argue the illusion of a fair gathering point for discussion. Opposing views consider the Internet to wear away traditional social connections, negatively affecting the balance of power and aiding in social withdrawal. Many argue that the Internet aids in inactivity, reduced thinking capacity, and limiting social encounters (Benkler, 2006). Others believe that the use of cyberdemocratic government websites offers insignificant involvement to civic debate (Ferber et al., 2006). However, it can be counter-argued that online civic expression complements the offline counterparts, such as discussion, which can realistically lead to higher levels of public engagement in politics and the governing democracy (Shah et al., 2005).

According to Benkler (2006), individuals often experience an overload of information when using the Internet. With countless individuals speaking on matters and issues, it becomes increasingly difficult for messages to be heard or processed (Benkler, 2006). Others believe that money will end up dominating the capacity to be heard by producing a "digital divide" (Norris, 2001). Another concern involves the growing fragmentation of attention. Individuals are

beginning to adopt personally customized Internet windows. This practice offers little common ground for political discourse except for those individuals who have similarly customized windows based on political discourse and interests; such a practice can ultimately eliminate the public sphere on the Internet and lead to polarization. When like-minded participants share their views via public forums or other interactive features, they “tend to reinforce each other’s views and beliefs without engaging with alternative views or seeing the concerns and critiques of others,” thus increasing the distance between differing views (Benker, 2006, p. 235).

Access to the technology and information is not equal; affordable rates are not always offered, and in some places global access is extremely limited and barely different than the bourgeois public sphere from Habermas’ time (Papacharissi, 2002). Online technologies are only used by a small population consisting mostly of “exclusive and elite” individuals with the correct monetary resources to stay engaged within the virtual public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). For individuals with access to a computer and willingness to communicate, the Internet is a priceless resource for political participation. Today, the Internet can be accessed through a computer, a portable tablet, or even a mobile device with Internet capabilities. Although access to the Internet may not guarantee increased involvement and engagement in political discourse or activity, it provides individuals with the opportunity to be politically involved in virtual venues and serves as a potential equalizer for all involved parties.

Cyberdemocratic Interactivity

It is of great importance to understand the cyberdemocratic public sphere in terms of interactivity. Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese have used interactivity as one of five criteria used to evaluate political websites. It is a widely used term with relatively high interest, but its definitions vary widely. Difficult to define, it has been used in various categories of study

including communications, technology, and psychology (Ferber et al., 2005b; Rafaeli, 1988).

Rafaeli defines interactivity as “an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (p. 111). Jensen (1998) terms interactivity as “a measure of a media’s potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication” (p.201). Broadly, interactivity can be defined as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Steuer, 1992, p. 84). Each of the provided definitions emphasizes the role of the media user and the control over the environment. For this study, interactivity was viewed as an Internet-based feature thought to promote public deliberation.

Generally speaking, interactivity is assumed to occur during face-to-face conversation, yet it has been proposed that interactivity can occur in “mediated communication settings” (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 110), such as the Internet. For full interactivity to be possible, communication functions need to be interchangeable between parties. For example, relative to the Internet, interactivity deals with communication exchanges in which users have the ability to send messages, provide and receive feedback, and alter or modify any exchange. Interactivity is not the practice of clicking on Internet links for access to information or web surfing without any possibility of communicating with another party. Forms of interactivity are visible on various websites and may take the shape of email, opinion forums, polls, surveys, chat rooms, and search engine links, yet the degree to which messages and feedback can be exchanged constitutes true interactivity (Ferber et al., 2005b). Many contend that the insertion of an email address on a website offers the capability for dialogue, yet according to Lilleker and Malagon (2010), “there must also be reasons for clicking on the address to send a message; thus interactivity is a

function of both the inclusion of interactive tools as well as of the language used when offering that tool” (p. 27).

Interaction can refer to non-interactive website features that promote person-to-person communication. Examples of non-interactive features include contact information such as telephone numbers, fax numbers, or physical addresses. These methods of interaction facilitate a means of communication, other than through the use of the Internet. A vast majority of political websites promote both on and offline interaction (Ferber et al., 2005b). Lilleker and Malagon also explored the linkage between discourse and interactivity on political websites. Discourse refers to the language used to communicate explicit values, ideas, and thoughts. It is the “public embodiment” (2012, p. 28) of the website made available to the public. Therefore, the language used on political websites can affect the relationship between users of the site and can enable or disable interactivity (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010).

For Habermas, the democratic, civil society is comprised of discourse and availability of information within the public sphere (1989), thus both non-interactive features and interactivity are necessary for individuals to have the most opportunistic values of cyberdemocracy. However, political officials are often reluctant to provide all the necessary features for fear of losing control of the discourse, the likely possibility of conflict, and the desire to avoid monitoring or removing content deemed libelous, lewd, or obscene. When open forums are neither offered nor suppressed, website officials are viewed as limiting freedom of expression, and censored participants claim this to be a violation of the First Amendment (Ferber et al., 2006).

Model of Cyber-Interactivity

In order for interactivity to be complete, communication functions must be interchangeable along a multi-path channel of communication. Upon studying interactivity, McMillan (2002) devised a four-part model of cyber-interactivity (see Appendix A). This model illustrates one and two directional cyber-interactive communications. According to McMillan's model, one-way cyber-interactive communication consisted of feedback from receiver to sender or a monologue from sender to receiver. Two-way communication involved "mutual discourse" and "responsive dialogue." Two-way interactive communication can be easily demonstrated by e-mail in which a sender and receiver exchanged messages, however, this differs with the introduction of a third party.

Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2007) expanded McMillan's four-part model of cyber-interactivity (McMillan, 2002) to suggest a three-way model of communication encompassing a six-part model of cyber-interactivity (see Appendix A). According to Ferber et al., political websites have features and the potential for features to engage users in political discourse. A political discourse requires conversation between multiple parties in its most basic definition, thus a third dimension of communication was added to McMillan's original model. The six-part model of interactivity shows the potential political websites to engage users in communication aimed at influencing other participating parties--an apparatus for "public deliberation."

Three-way communication allows a third party to receive a message, which creates a "publication" (Ferber et al., 2007). A publication is a message made available to more than just two participating parties; consequently, multiple viewers have the chance to participate in the discourse. Public discourse and responses are forms of the three-way model of cyber-interactivity (Ferber et al., 2007). It is important to understand the differences between one, two,

and three-way communication in cyber-interaction. Polls and bulletins are forms of three-way communication in which individuals can participate, yet the website maintains some control over the content, thus a controlled response. In public discourse, such as chat rooms and forums, individuals are virtually unrestricted in what content or material they or their peers add. Conversation, debate, and ideas are promoted in this form of three-way interaction (Ferber et al., 2007) and those who manage the websites exert little control. Although the potential for inappropriate or offensive commentary is high, it can be argued that three-way communication provides an important feature to communication and the virtual public sphere. In facilitating public discourse by addressing a third party, audience interaction and reach are multiplied, thus expanding the reach and impact of civic discourse. Overall, the public sphere and three-directional communication are inherently important to the development of cyberdemocracy. It is necessary for three-dimensional communication to be made a part of political or civic websites for cyberdemocracy to reach its full potential.

Rationale and Research Questions

If one considers the Internet as an emerging public sphere, the model of cyber-interactive communication can serve to assess how much progress has been made toward that end. This thesis explores how a powerful legislature, the European Parliament, has adopted the newly emerging technologies to promote civic engagement and involvement to promote self-governance and political movements. Despite the obstacles some see with the use of the Internet, the possibilities for it to encourage change, incite reform, or promote development within the political sphere are still very present. One must ask how far nations have come to achieving the ideals of cyberdemocracy and how much room for development is there for such powerful legislatures to grow cyberdemocratically. Communication technologies are constantly

changing, but are the growing political powers adapting and advancing as well with the ideals of a networked public sphere?

The study of communication and cyberdemocracy is important for any nation. The possibilities that may arise from a more developed cyberdemocratic website may change the definition of civic engagement from a face-to-face form of participation to a highly networked and asynchronous form of involvement. Promoting one's ideas and requests within a respectful and informative context may be the way to achieve a better practice of democracy as put forth by the ancient Greeks and nations they inspired. The following two research questions will be answered with the aid of five criteria including, content, usability, interactivity, transparency and audience:

RQ1: Using the five criteria: content, usability, interactivity, transparency and audience, how is the European Union using the Internet to boost participation in democracy, better known as cyberdemocracy?

RQ2: To what extent is the European Parliament website implementing interactive features based on the model of cyber-interactive communication?

Method

Procedure

An evaluation of the European Parliament website, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>, was conducted in the winter of January 2014 to determine the degree to which the European Union Parliament uses the Internet to boost participation in cyberdemocracy and to what degree interactive features are present. A 77-item evaluation key (see Appendix B) was formulated to determine whether a feature was present (P), somewhat present (S), or not present (N). The codebook was derived from Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese's (2004) evaluation of the 51 U.S. State

legislative websites. The aim was to determine to what extent cyberdemocracy has been achieved.

The five criteria of content, usability, transparency, audience, and interactivity have been developed to assess the features of cyberdemocratic websites as completely as possible (see Appendix B). *Content* includes such features as the listing of members and their contact information, committees and their reports and schedules, legislation past and pending, privacy and policy statements, and video and audio feeds. *Usability* refers to the use of multiple languages, banners, access for the impaired, site search engines, downloadable documents, and the use of cookies. *Transparency* consists of identifying who determines the content of the site and how to contact them as well as what organizational information is published. *Audience* encompasses providing useful information to citizens, teachers and students, and experts such as journalists. *Interactivity* is comprised of the features that enable citizens to contact representatives and includes active email addresses, toll-free phone numbers, subscriptions to updates (such as RSS feeds and newsletters), and public forums.

The present study also applied the six-part model of cyber-interactivity (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007) to determine what level of interactivity the European Parliament permits. The two dimensions of the model include the direction of communication and level of receiver control. Levels range from the lowest level of interactivity (one-way monologue) to the highest (three-way public discourse). One-way communication is merely the provision of information with little, if any, receiver control. Two-way communication involves only two parties and is largely interpersonal. Three-way communication allows users to address a third party or larger audience. The user has the most control over the content, allowing even unknown individuals to

receive and reply to a posted message. This type of interactivity best embodies the ideals of interactivity by allowing users the greatest access to the largest audiences.

Results

Content

As previously stated, content directly relates to the idea of participation and civic engagement by providing citizens and Internet users the necessary information required to participate in their own governance. Although supplying content and information is reminiscent of digital democracy, and e-government based its primary purpose to inform constituents, what the European Parliament provides facilitates discourse. The 31 content features listed within the codebook detail the types of information available. Primarily, the website is divided into sub-categories including News, Video, Think tank, Committees, Plenary, MEPs (Member of the European Parliament), Organisation, Delegations, EPTV, Parliament and You, and More. Modes to reach Parliament representatives including physical addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses were all easily accessible and could be found through the *MEPs* link. One could view each nation's Parliament representatives, a list of committees and members as well as reports and schedules.

Under the News link, press releases, both present and archived from 1997 were searchable under a "Search News" toolbar. Also present were live and on-demand video feeds to view current meetings and some audio feed from the floor was also accessible, but it was not live. Additional links to corresponding websites were at the top of each page under "More," and educational and informative content for all ages and professionals were accessible under the "About Parliament" tab. Although not directly available within the Parliament website, individuals were able to view "Legislation Under Preparation" within the European Union site

that is directly linked to its sister site, the European Parliament. Votes on particular legislation both passed and not were posted along with the nation state's laws. This is likely due to the nature of the European Parliament. Those interested in finding out particular legislation are more likely to find this information within a nation's private website.

Usability

The usability of a website is a features-driven evaluation assessing the ease of use, design, and appearance of a website. According to the evaluation key, a website's usability is based on 10 features (see Appendix B). The European Parliament website's usability was found to be extremely high. It provided content in 23 possible languages, catering to all people from the nation's represented within the Parliament. Access for the deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired was provided by video and audio feeds respectively. The use of banners informed users about upcoming events and the newly developed mobile access. Additionally, the mobile application, entitled "EP mobile," can be formatted for easy use and was also available in all 23 languages.

Present on each webpage is a site search engine specifically designed to search within that page. The European Parliament uses a site map and index that lists all the pages available on the site. Importantly, there is an abundance of downloadable documents and links. These documents can be downloaded as PDF versions and can be accessed on your desktop or laptop. Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary (RSS) feeds are also presented to publish frequently updated information including news headlines, added audio and video feeds, press conferences, plenary sessions, Twitter feeds, and upcoming events. The use of RSS feeds allows users to be updated and provides direct links to topics of interest. Lastly, the webpage does not automatically gather information and addresses; rather, the webpage offers the option of signing

up for email alerts but not physical addresses. One may also send an inquiry when the site requests contact information from its users.

Transparency

Citizens' rights to access information about what practices a government is engaged in, how funding is being allocated and spent, to whom contracts are awarded, and additional information about governmental procedures is essential to the promotion of democracy. Not only does access to this information enable citizens of a government to be well informed, it also helps to combat government corruption and establish a sense of trust in the government (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). The European Parliament's website provides citizens with access to a wide range of information essential to revealing government transparency, thus promoting this ideal.

The European Parliament, under the tabs "Parliament and You" or "About Parliament," offers constituents a myriad of information promoting government transparency. Under these tabs, users may access a transparency and ethics statement issued by the European Parliament, as well as information about interest groups, contracts, grants, and the Parliament's budget. In addition, users will find links to contact the site's webmaster, access to the site's legal notice, contacts for the press, a cookie policy statement, a site disclaimer, and access to place enquiries.

The final statement on the European Parliament's *Transparency and Ethics* section reads as follows: "In conformity with Parliament's commitment to transparency, all the transparency tools provided hereunder aim at facilitating citizens' scrutiny over Parliament's activities and, in particular, its legislative work," (Ethics and Transparency section, para. 3, 2014). This statement, in addition to the types of information site users may access, is evidence of the

European Parliament's adherence to a high standard of transparency and promotion of democracy, or cyberdemocracy.

Audience

A website, such as that of the European Parliament, should have the ability to serve a variety of audiences. General citizens, lobbyists, journalists, educators, lawyers, and researchers should all be addressed as an audience to a particular site. Upon evaluation, the European Parliament website catered to a specific audience. Under the Parliament and You tab, the following quote helps define who the intended audience of the website is.

This is your assembly, the only directly-elected European Union institution. On these pages you will find a short introduction to how the parliament works. We present its powers and functions, explain how Members of Parliament organise their work and explain how you can contact us. A last chapter is devoted to past events that have shaped the Parliament's role in the EU.

(<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html>)

Audience for citizens included tabs such as "Fact Sheets," "Citizen's Enquiries," "Access to Documents," and "Parliament Near You." There did not seem to be a clear distinction between information for professionals and information for citizens. The "Newsroom" and "Press Kits," used by journalists to cover the elections of 2014, were accessible to all users. The Newsroom covered press releases and allowed access to archived press releases as well. Press Kits provided an overview of the current state of Parliament during the election period, infographics, images, and current events. Press briefings, media accreditation, and a news hotline were also available for users. All these various functions supplied useful information to users and those interested in the status of not only the election, but Parliament as a whole.

Interactivity

According to Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2004), interactive features are defined as those that reflect a “two-way exchange between a user and site, including the ability of the user to modify the exchange” (p. 14). Features that met the above criteria were considered interactive. Many argue the definition of interactivity; however, if mutual political discourse and the ability for deliberation are available, it is truly interactive. In the case of the European Union, two-way exchanges between user and government officials were allowed.

Features that met the interactivity criteria that were available on the European Parliament website included active email and direct email links to members. Users were able to send MEPs emails by accessing their information on the full-list or individual profiles of members. Webmasters were also accessible through email links. Member phone numbers were listed, providing a means of communication, contact, and discourse. It is possible for websites to have non-interactive features that promote interaction. A prime example includes the offering of phone numbers to reach Parliament representatives, which facilitates communication through means other than the Internet.

Each webpage had links to social media sites such as twitter and Facebook. Each MEP had links to their social media profiles, some more than others. There were a variety of popular media sites that could be accessed and were linked to the homepage. Most importantly, online public forums were somewhat available within the Parliament website. Under the “About Parliament” tab, individuals were able to put forth petitions and request signatures. There was a lack of public forums and polls for civic discussion; however, users were encouraged to use the social media links and sites to discuss their beliefs and occurrences with the European Union and Parliament.

Discussion

The evaluation of the European Parliament website as of 2014 has revealed the site to be quite advanced in promoting cyberdemocracy. The amount of content is overwhelming, yet with the use of the search engine provided on each page, individuals are able to find what they need with only a few clicks. Easy to navigate, the website offers a number of downloadable documents and discussions that facilitates the transfer of information that can be used within the public sphere; however, they do not guarantee a means of public discourse.

It can be assumed that the European Parliament provides e-government and is beginning to adapt the promotion of cyberdemocracy. Although information is provided, multiple audiences are addressed, the website is fairly transparent, and it is easy to use, it cannot be thoroughly assumed that it will provide a means for public civic discourse and deliberation—the core concepts surrounding cyberdemocracy. The lack of polls and public forums suggests that the Parliament is not interested in providing a means of public expression. They may fear irate commentary or libel. Managing and monitoring the website can become cumbersome and can be considered censorship and a violation of non-partisanship standards. With that being said, by using social media and encouraging users to take part in social media discussions, they may be appealing to a younger audience and a variety of users without containing the discussion on their own website.

The interactive features, including live email links, are worthy elements that increase the possibility of discourse. The European Parliamentary Research Service at <http://epthinktank.eu/> is directly linked to the Parliament website and contains a blog dedicated to reporting on the European Union community. Individuals can post questions and comments, thus interacting with others on the blog and the authors. The addition of such features may be a contribution to the

goal of achieving an ideal cyberdemocracy. The idea of three-way exchange can be adapted and used within this forum. As technological advances continue globally, it is important for national websites to stay up to date. Advocates of cyberdemocracy may argue that interactive features are the key to reaching its ideals, yet perhaps they are heavily focused on technology and not understanding whether users want to interact via the Internet. With that being said, in comparison to the studies conducted by Ferber, Franz, and Pugliese in 2004 for U.S. legislative websites, it seems as though the European Parliament is more embracing of the concept of cyberdemocracy and is more likely to adapt more to its ideals.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The complete study has provided a glimpse into cyberdemocracy and what is being offered by the European Parliament website. It is an underlying assumption that individuals from democratic nations would like to be more engaged and involved within their nation's politics. This assumption itself should be tested. This study was limited to only looking at the European Parliament website, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>, and in some instances the European Union website europa.eu; consequently, other international websites were not evaluated for comparison. It may also be advantageous to integrate other cyberdemocratic websites, such as various international democratic websites, to analyze and assess the degree of interactivity. Moreover, it would also be interesting to see political websites from non-democratic nations and compare each based on the promotion of civic engagement and involvement.

While these findings provide insight into the extent to which the European Parliament and its 28 represented nations use the Internet for civic engagement and cyberdemocracy, other studies need to be conducted to understand how much citizens use and capitalize on its offerings.

Due to limitations and restrictions, the study only investigated the English version of the website. Using the same evaluation standard, it could be very revealing to extend the study to different languages to incorporate others from the European Union. It would be ideal to complete a longitudinal study every few years to assess changes or updates to the website. The present study does not report on how often content is updated, how frequently links are changed or corrected, or how often links are clicked on. That may be valuable information when creating or updating a website to be more cyber-interactive and useful to participants. Lastly, much of this study was conducted during the election period; therefore, an abundance of information and activities were available that may not have been otherwise. Conducting this study during a non-election period may provide a more balanced representation.

Cyberdemocracy is an evolving concept for the advancing technological world in which we live; however, it has yet to reach its full potential and possibilities. The European Parliament stands by democracy and promotes cyberdemocracy as seen by the present study. It may be useful for other nations to learn and prosper cyberdemocratically by modeling the level of sophistication and execution presented within the website thus allowing and aiding citizens to gain the outcomes they search for as represented citizens.

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<http://www.knightcomm.org/read-the-report-and-comment/>

Appendix A

Figures

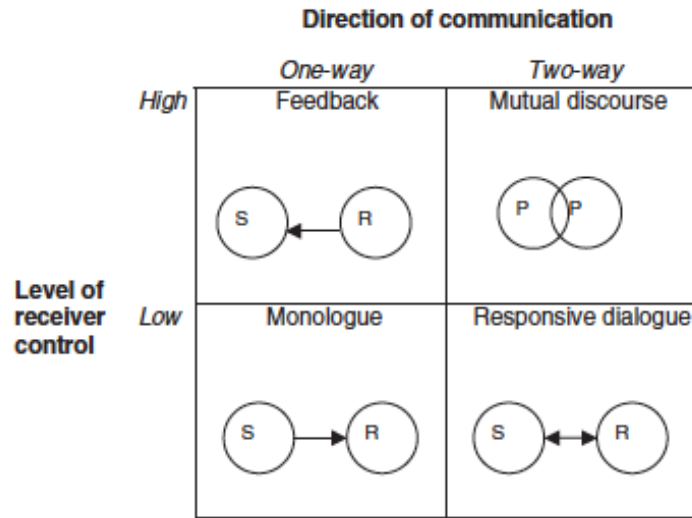


Figure 1. A Four-Part Model of Cyber-Interactivity

Note: S = sender; R = receiver; P = participant (where sender/receiver roles are interchangeable).

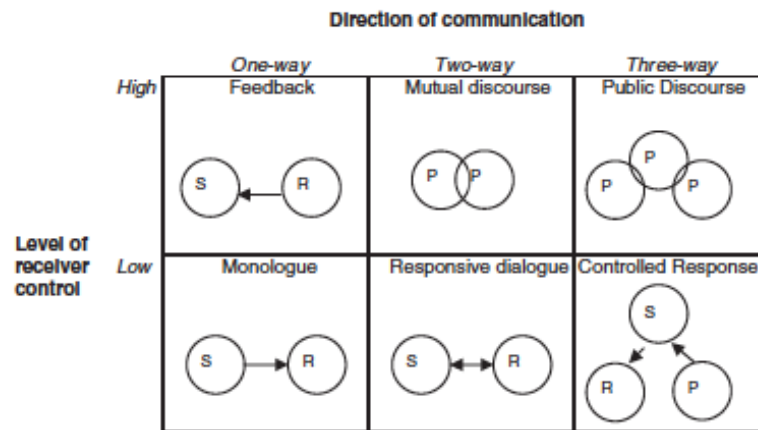


Figure 2. A Six-Part Model of Cyber-Interactivity

Note: S = sender; R = receiver; P = participant (where sender/receiver roles are interchangeable).

Appendix B

Cyberdemocracy Website Evaluation Form

Legislature: European Parliament

URL: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>**Evaluation Key**

N = not present

P = present

S = somewhat present

Content

Comments	Status	Feature
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html?filter=all&leg <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MEP's- Multiple locations (Postal address, Bruxelles, Strasbourg) 	P	Physical addresses
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html?filter=all&leg	P	Phone numbers
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html?filter=all&leg	P	Fax numbers
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html?filter=all&leg	P	E-mail addresses
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/information_offices.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Parliament near you"- click map. Complete list available 	P	Maps of districts/ Parliament near you
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/schedule <ul style="list-style-type: none"> able to filter, date, time, committee name, ability to listen & agenda 	P	Floor calendar/schedules
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/full-list.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> can search under committees or listed under each individual 	P	List of Committees
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parlArchives/comArch/comDocSearch.do?language=en <ul style="list-style-type: none"> archived committees 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each committee has these links 	P	List of members
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/reports.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> written "working documents" and not always "reports" 	P	Reports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "calendar" link under each committee or under each committee there are links to this information 	P	Committee schedules
http://europa.eu/eu-law/legislation/index_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under this link, it is EU "Legislation Under Preparation"(European Union) 	N	List of pending legislation
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/RECH_actes_preparatoires.do?ihmlang=en	N	Searchable?
NA	N	List of state laws

NA	N	Searchable?
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/legal-notice- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of personal data and http://europa.eu/geninfo/legal_notices_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Data Collections 	P	Privacy statement
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/legal-notice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • copyright, disclaimer, use of logos/trademark http://europa.eu/geninfo/legal_notices_en.htm	P	Policy statement
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/press-release and	P	Press Releases
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/press-release - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • archived to 2009, searchable under “Search News” Search bar http://europa.eu/newsroom/press-releases/databases/index_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under sub-categories, such as European Central Bank, Press Releases are archived. The European Central Bank, for instance, has archived material dating to 1997. 	P	Archived?
http://europartv.europa.eu/en/home.aspx <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPTV http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/schedule/ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some required authentication, downloading media player, email to send a clip of what desired time frame http://europa.eu/newsroom/audiovisual/index_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under the heading: “Showing Today” users can access current fee. 	P	Video feed from floor
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/other-events/ - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be filtered by dates http://europa.eu/newsroom/audiovisual/index_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • archives for the last 30 days. http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/videoByArchive.cfm?sitelang=en <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under this link users can access a variety of videos, archived back to 1962. 	P	Archived
http://europa.eu/newsroom/audiovisual/audio/index_en.htm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There isn’t live feed from the floor, but there is access to a number of audio files. 	S	Audio feed from floor
http://europa.eu/newsroom/audiovisual/audio/index_en.htm	S	Archived
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/assistants.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a list of assistants associated with each MEP. There is no contact information for the assistants, aside from the contact info for the MEP. 	S	Staff Info
NA	N	Votes

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under this list, each member is listed. Users can access information about the country they represent, when and where they were born, information about their EU activity, and their CVs. 	P	Bios of members
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/a-z <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This tab lists all sites on the EU site, as well as links to external sites. 	P	Links to other sites
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html , http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/007c895f4c/Powers-and-procedures.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/0081f4b3c7/Law-making-procedures-in-detail.html	P	Education/Explanation of terms/legislative process
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/reports.html#sidesForm -searchable	P	Content from previous sessions
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html	P	Educational (vs. Indoctrinational)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html	P	Informative (vs. Fluff)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html	P	Balanced (vs. Biased)

Usability

N = not present

P = present

S = somewhat present

Comments	Status	Organizational features
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23 possible languages 	P	Non-English version
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banners informing users about upcoming events, mobile access, etc. 	P	Banners
http://europartv.europa.eu/accessibility.aspx	S	Access for impaired
Present on each page, specially designed to search within that page	P	Site search engine
http://europa.eu/geninfo/sitemap_en.htm	P	Site map/index
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/documents.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/home.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/theseecretarygeneral/en/secretary_general/home/home_all.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00b3f21266/At-your-service.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegistreWeb/search/simpleSearchHome.htm?language=EN	P	Downloadable documents
	N	Fees
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/rss/en/rss.html http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/stay-connected.html feed://www.europarl.europa.eu/rss/doc/plenary/en.xml feed://www.europarl.europa.eu/rss/video/debates-plenary/en.xml	P	RSS feeds
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/cookie-policy	P	Info gathering/cookies
https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/EUEPEN/subscriber/new <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Webpage gives option to sign up for email alerts- not physical address https://www.secure.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/askEP.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This link is to send an inquiry, where the site requests contact information from the user. 	S	Info gathering/addresses

Comments:

Mobile app also available-for mobile and computer screen can be formatted to look like mobile

Comments	Status	Feature
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users are able to send MEPs email by accessing their information on the full-list. 	P	Active e-mail to members
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each member has a phone number listed for the official locations. Each member's number is different. 	P	Toll-free phone
https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/EUEPEN/subscriber/new http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/contact	P	Subscribe to updates
https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/EUEPEN/subscriber/new <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under this link users can access the webmaster's email. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users may also contact the webmaster here. 	P	E-mail to webmaster
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/001eb38200/European-citizens'-initiative.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Here citizens can put forth petitions and request signatures. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00fd7b595a/Social-media.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under various links to social media, such as Twitter, users are encouraged to discuss what is happening with the EU. 	S	Public Forum
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each member has links to social media listed under his/her info page. Some have more social media listed than other http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00fd7b595a/Social-media.html <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This link provides access to a variety of popular social media. 	P	Links to social media

Comments:

ThinkTank blog- <http://epthinktank.eu/>

[Offers: If you are part of the European Parliament community and are interested in these topics, or want other information research for your parliamentary work, do not hesitate to “Ask EPRS” (*EP intranet only*)]

Transparency

N = not present

P = present

S = somewhat present

Comments	Status	Feature
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/0060f4f133/Ethics-and-transparency.html	P	Transparency Statement
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/0060f4f133/Ethics-and-transparency.html	P	Interest Groups
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/007a4abddc/Interest-groups.html	P	Invitations to Tender (Grants)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/007e863b16/Contracts-awarded.html	P	Contracts Awarded
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00beb2559e/Grants.html	P	Grants
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00264f77f5/Grants-to-political-parties-and-foundations.html	P	Grants to Political Parties and Foundations
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00059f3ea3/The-budget-of-the-European-Parliament.html http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/www/index-en.htm	P	Parliament Budget
NA	N	Ownership
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/contact/	P	Contact webmaster
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/legal-notice/	P	Organizational Information
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services	P	Contacts (Press service)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services/audiovisual	P	Contacts
	S	Page dates
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/legal-notice	P	Legal (privacy) statement
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/cookie-policy/	P	Cookies (policy) statement
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/contact/	P	Citizen's Inquiry
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en/legal-notice/	P	Disclaimer

Audience

N = not present

P = present

S = somewhat present

Comment	Status	Feature
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room	P	Newsroom
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/press-release	P	Press Releases (archived)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/infographics	P	(Info)graphics
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services	P	Press officers
http://www.elections2014.eu/en/press-kit	P	Press kits
NA	N	Lobbyist in a box
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services/hotline-newsdesk	P	Hotline
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services/accreditation	P	Media accreditation
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services/media-professionals	P	Media professionals
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/contacts-and-services/bookings	P	Bookings (AV assistance)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/home/home.do	P	Store searches
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/home/home.do	P	Request notifications
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/other-events/video?event=20140210-1100-SPECIAL-UNKN	P	Press Briefings

Comments:

This is your assembly, the only directly-elected European Union institution. On these pages you will find a short introduction to how the parliament works. We present its powers and functions, explain how Members of Parliament organise their work and explain how you can contact us. A last chapter is devoted to past events that have shaped the Parliament's role in the EU.