

*Toward More Transparent Government  
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BEYOND TRANSPARENCY – NEW STANDARDS FOR LEGISLATIVE  
INFORMATION SYSTEMS

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Since the mid-1990s legislative bodies throughout the world have increasingly used the Internet to make their activities and their documents available to their Members, their staff, and the general public. As access to the Internet has become more widespread, recent studies have suggested that a growing number of citizens have begun to use the Web not only for business purposes or to obtain government services, but also to find information about political issues, to determine the views of their representatives, and to learn about the work of their legislature.

Research I conducted in 2006 (*Beyond Transparency: New Standards for Legislative Information Systems*. European Parliament, Luxembourg, July 2006. 168 pages. ISBN 92-823-2058-8. <http://www.ecprd.org/ecprd/getfile.do?id=5028> ) explored the issue of the quality of the public legislative websites of the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament in meeting the needs of citizens for information regarding such public policy matters. By what standards should such sites be judged and what measures can be used for determining areas that need to be improved?

One of the most commonly cited objectives for legislative websites is that of transparency, meaning generally that the documents and actions of the legislature are directly accessible to the public. This author contends, however, that to achieve a level of transparency that is effective in meeting the needs of citizens, it is no longer sufficient for legislatures simply to make their documents accessible through the Internet. The information and documents available on legislative websites must go beyond transparency and meet the highest possible standards in five key areas: 1) accuracy 2) timeliness 3) completeness 4) clarity and 5) context.

During the course of my research I also identified a number of challenges where additional R&D may lead to possible solutions that can be developed, tested, and compared. In my view, three of the most important involve the need to find 1) better means for integrating sources 2) more effective methods for the participation by citizens in the legislative process and 3) more constructive and informative applications of usability testing.

Since the first systems appeared over 10 years ago, the growth of information sources relevant to proposed legislation has been extraordinary. Many of these have been created by organizations within the legislature itself as more and more Members, committees, and offices have discovered the power of the Web for providing information and communicating positions. While this increasing wealth of information is highly beneficial, it poses a significant challenge to users who must first discover the wide range of sources that exist and second must know how to use them to have a more complete understanding of the policy issue and the proposed legislative solutions. Building systems that can provide a relatively seamless integration of diverse information sources that can be better understood by citizens is a daunting challenge. It requires research, development, and evaluation of the optimum technical means for meeting this requirement. However, while sound technical research is essential, it alone is not sufficient. Solving this problem also requires analysis of the political, organizational, and management strategies required for achieving this goal. Absent the necessary political will, organizational structure, and management procedures, the best technical solutions will not succeed. It is critical that we meet these challenges. Legislative systems that cannot achieve adequate integration of sources face the risk not only of leaving citizens un-informed, but perhaps more seriously, mis-informed about the status, purpose, and potential outcome of proposed legislation.

Second, citizens need more effective means for communicating their views to their representatives and their representatives need more effective means for taking those views into account. Some of the early enthusiasm for the Web as a method for conducting plebiscites on public policy issues has fortunately been tempered by the reality that most democracies are purposefully representational rather than direct. However, the improved capacity of the Web to support active participation in events has renewed pressure as well as increased the opportunities for enabling useful and manageable dialog between Members and their constituents. There is important research going on in this area and it should continue to be supported. The Web holds the as-yet unfulfilled potential to engage more citizens more effectively and beneficially in the political and legislative processes of the society. Given recent trends in the attitude and actions of many citizens toward their democratic institutions, this is all to the good. We must not miss this opportunity.

Finally, I believe that we need more R&D on usability testing specifically geared toward citizens' and Members' use of legislative websites. We must learn 1) how to build sites that are easily mastered and easily navigated 2) what is required to help users understand the actual content of these systems and, perhaps most importantly, 3) what Members and citizens need most from these systems. This will involve not only technical analysis, but a deeper grasp of both the possibilities and the limitations of legislative information systems in our modern information-based civic society.

The results of this workshop should contribute to achieving the above goals for legislative websites by focusing on key public policy goals for dissemination of government information, identifying best practices, and helping to achieve better interoperability at all levels between systems.