

"This site's aim is to maintain a useful, stable, ongoing connection with the public": On the Gap between Texts and Applications in Knesset Members' Personal Websites.

Introduction

This article refers to the concept of a political personal website as a means of connection with the public, in the realm of Israeli Knesset Members (henceforth – MKs). *Contact* narrative - as reflected through sites' texts and MKs open questionnaires' answers - was examined in light of the sites' human interactive applications enabling connectivity between representatives and citizens. The research rationale stems from the intriguing question: are there any discrepancies between the texts and the actual applications used by Israeli parliamentarians; as sometimes website' texts vis-à-vis its applications can reflect completely different attitudes and discordance.

I will begin by briefly surveying the research literature. Next, I turn to outline research stages and methods employed. Empirical findings will be presented next, accompanied by text excerpts reflecting the *Contact* narrative. I conclude with a discussion regarding the findings, their meaning and practical implications.

e-Democracy

My research is rooted in the relatively new discipline of e-Democracy and focuses on an e-Politics issue. First, I examine the meaning of this term and then move on to the more pragmatic sphere of e-Politics.

E-Democracy deals with the mutual relationships between Internet and Democracy. Its basis is the notion that using the Internet as a political platform can serve as a practical solution to the '*crisis of representation*' (Hayward 1995) also known as '*crisis of political communication*' (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995), while enabling democratic patterns of communicative power. e-Democracy uses information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance democratic structures and processes (Coleman & Norris 2005, p. 7). Online democratic applications create a new deliberative arena (Min 2007; Lim & Kann 2008); empower citizens by exposing them to information and reinvigorate the connection between citizens and their elected representatives.

The empowering capability of ICTs in general, and especially the Internet, can also be attributed to their ability to permit individuals and groups (otherwise silent and invisible) to voice their opinion and thereby reveal the diverse opinions in society. This, in part, is due to the fact that ICTs facilitate the dispersal of

power away from centralized governments. As a result, bureaucratic institutions are being challenged as a sole means of political and social control and lose their monopoly over key sources of information, permitting alternative voices to emerge (Milakovich 2010, 3).

E-Democracy raised high hopes as well as skepticism more than a decade ago. Some had heralded and proclaimed the Internet as the 'next thing' and as one of the more efficient tools through which democracies can enhance citizens' participation (Grossman 1995; Poster 1995; Coleman & Gotze 2001). While others had underestimated online politics' potential (Davis 1999; Margolis & Resnick 2000); not to say warned of its negative consequences (Bellamy & Taylor 1998; Resnick 1999; Shapiro 1999).

Both great expectations and bleak forecasts vanished into thin air, only to be replaced by moderate and realistic opinions maintaining that the Internet is a mere technology and its applications and implications depend on the nature and quality of its use (Coleman & Norris 2005, p. 32). Technology is neutral and there is no deterministic connection between new media and democratization (Coleman & Kaposi 2006, p. 6). Despite the fact that the Internet did not revolutionize political system-citizens relationships, it has the potential to revitalize faded political communication (Coleman & Blumler 2009,9) as it certainly facilitates better communication channels and offer user friendly platforms for doing so (Ward, Gibson & Lusoli 2005; Lusoli, Ward & Gibson 2006; Leston-Bandeira & Ward 2008).

E-democracy conceptual model developed by Steven Clift (2003) includes five main actors: Governments; e-Citizens; Political Groups; Media and Private Sector. Government authorities provide access to information and interact online with citizens; political groups run web advocacy campaigns; the media (including portals and search engines) provide news and navigation tools, while the private sector represents connectivity, software and technology commercial activities (Clift 2003).

The British parliament' research center had issued a Standard Note in the subject of e-Democracy (Parry 2004) in which different aspects of e-democracy are being detailed. It should be noted that, by its nature, the standard note focuses on the government' activities and fails to portray the media and private sector's e-democracy activities. The note enumerates the following activities:

1. **Public Consultation** – firstly, government e-democracy exploration had focused on consultation within executive policy making processes (Clift 2003); through *online consultation exercises, e-petitions* and *draft bills* (Parry 2004, 7-8). As the public wants to be listened to, parliaments and governments must seek ways to hear the broadest possible range of voices (Coleman & Normann 2000). These activities can be described as online deliberation.

2. **Seeing Parliament at work** – the more the public is informed of the parliament's work, the greater confidence he has in its work. Moreover, improving the availability of governmental and parliamentary information (agendas, proceedings, papers and legislative output, etc.), which can now be accessed online simply and cheaply from afar, increases public's awareness and understanding as well as parliament activities' transparency (Clift 2003; Parry 2004). Parliament's work can be seen through its website as well as through live webcasting of the plenum and committees' public proceedings (Parry 2004, 12-13).
3. **Interactive Politicians** – this aspect refers to the politicians' individual interaction with the public through emails, video conferencing and personal websites (Parry 2004, 9-12). At the individual level, the Internet has the potential to facilitate changes in 3 areas: Policy and issue campaigning; Party – Representative relations and Politician - Constituents relationships (Ward & Lusoli 2005, 60-61). The issue of interactive politicians and mainly the latter aspect mentioned (politicians-constituents interaction) are being further reviewed in the next paragraphs.

e-Politics

The notion of e-Politics refers to the actual use of Internet applications as political marketing tools during electoral campaigns and as a means of communication and information delivery during incumbency period. Political candidates' electoral web use bears completely different characteristics compared to serving parliamentarians' web use as both aim at distinctive targets. This research intentionally focuses on incumbent MKs' websites use while disregarding electoral web use. My basic assumption is that a real dialogue between constituents and parliamentarians can be further examined during term of office; as it doesn't revolve solely around electoral issues and has a more continuous nature which is less affected by electoral considerations.

For the last 15 years, parliamentarians have been harnessing the web as a political tool for *permanent campaigning* (Blumenthal 1982; Newman 2001), as well as a *communication channel* and an *engagement tool*. While the notion of *permanent campaigning* refers to the constant need of politicians to "market" and promote themselves, throughout the year and not only during election campaign; the notion of *communicating channel* refers to the growing politicians' use of the web to communicate their views to the users using websites, blogs, newsletters and emails (Leston-Bandeira 2007); whilst the web as an *engagement tool* refers to the contribution politicians' websites have on the connection between representatives and constituents (Zittel 2003).

Through official parliamentarians' sites, users can easily access important information and consequently receive wiser and more informed decisions. In addition, parliamentarians' official websites and blogs (which include communicative features such as comments and forum) are being perceived as more favorable to political exchange as politicians are actually aware of the interaction and mostly take active part in it (Staeuber & Gasser 2009)

During the first decade (1995-2005) main Internet political use had been done through websites. Sites use had evolved and spread gradually, while politicians grew accustomed to using the Internet and recognized its political importance (Jackson 2003; Ward & Lusoli 2005; Jackson 2007; Williamson 2009).

The terms *Web 1.0* and *Web 2.0* describe developmental stages of the World Wide Web:

Web 1.0 describes the initial phase in which Internet communication bore a more traditional, single-sided one-to-many nature. Content creators, mainly websites' administrators, provided data to a multitude of Internet users. Users had a rather passive role as consumers, with minimal to none influence on content creation and distribution (Petrik 2010).

Contemporary web stage, known as *Web 2.0*, represents the idea of a collaborative web that gives users an active role in creating and distributing content. Current Internet users do not settle for content consumption, but rather produce, create (*prosumers*) and share their own content online.

Some believe that the rapid dispersion of online engagement in social networks, wiki surroundings and sharing platforms connotes the emergence of a networked citizenry with a dynamic and convenient access to a fast growing repository of information and knowledge (Petrik 2010, 20). Furthermore, applying *Web 2.0* features through e-government platforms might imply a shift of control from the authorities to the citizens and enable a move from a representative system with a passive electorate to a deliberative-collaborative e-democracy, in which citizens are granted various options for participation (Petrik 2010, 20).

On a more pragmatic basis, *Web 2.0* platform offers parliamentarians diverse applications from Blogs, Microblogging services (*Twitter*) and Wikis, to social networks sites (SNS), namely *Facebook*, video and photographs sharing platforms (*YouTube*, *Picasa*, *Flickr*), in support of their ongoing political activity. *Web 2.0* applications enable an even more convenient setting for constituents-politicians interaction, as it allows users to voice their opinions in a simple and friendly manner through user-generated content features.

Web 2.0 applications use the Internet as a platform (O'Reilly 2005), and can be integrated into websites. Moreover, applications are no longer limited to the PC platform. Any web application can be seen as software above the level of a single device. The development of the web as platform extends this idea to

synthetic applications composed of services provided by multiple computers (O'Reilly 2005).

As contemporary politicians' personal websites are comprised of multimedia features, Web 2.0 applications and comprehensive content sections, they still serve as the core of their online activity. These websites are content rich. They serve as online archives and as the main information sources regarding the parliamentarians' political and public activity (e.g. press releases, bills, speeches, parliamentary activity reports). In addition, sites include detailed contact options and link to all other web applications. Therefore, I have decided to focus on the websites as it allows greater analyzing options.

Personal Websites

Politicians' personal websites have advantages for both politicians and citizens as interactive two-way channels. These can assist in creating a closer bond between constituents and their representatives.

From the citizens' perspective – politicians' sites are free of charge, user-friendly and serve as a relatively easy accessed political communicative tool and information source. Citizens can use politicians' sites as a source of information and as a simple way to contact them, send questions, requests and petitions. They can publish their views and participate in online debates as well as track politicians' activity through websites' archives.

From the parliamentarians' point of view – The main effort is in the establishment stage. Establishing a website requires an initial investment of time and money. Maintaining a website is time and men power consuming as well, though in negligible scope compared to the primary effort.

Parliamentarians present themselves to their constituents through their websites (Goffman 1990; Miller 1995; Doring 2002). This can be seen as a cost-efficient self-advertisement (Stromer-Galley 2000). Parliamentarians can address all citizens as well as prospective voters through their websites, answer questions and learn more about the prevalent opinions through interactive features as forums, comments, surveys and chats.

Politicians-websites' features can be roughly divided into two categories: *Person-Oriented features* and *Issue-Oriented features* (Staeuber & Gasser 2009, p.3). Another categorization which is more or less equivalent differentiates between *Human Interaction features* and *Media Interaction features* (Stromer-Galley 2000).

The terms *Issue-Oriented features* as well as *Media Interaction features* refer to informative site-sections (biography, CV, speeches, articles, policy, annual reports, reports of activity, etc.) and multimedia features (links, search engines; audio and video streams, photo gallery, opinion polls, surveys, etc.).

These features do not require a human feedback and involve interaction with the medium solely, at most.

The terms *Person-Oriented features* and *Human Interaction features* refer to features which aim to contact and reach the users in order to empower and engage them in online discussions as well as in political and social involvement initiatives to strengthen democracy. Among these features are email, discussion forum, comments, instant messaging, online Q&A page, etc. As opposed to the prior group of features *Person-Oriented/Human Interaction features* require human feedback and reaction in respond to the users' input.

Content analysis researches, analyzing politicians' websites have shown that politicians deliberately avoid *Person-Oriented/Human Interaction features*. Stromer-Galley had indicated that politicians utilize media interaction features to create an outward appearance of interaction with the public, while limiting the options for a human discussion (Stromer-Galley 2000, pp.116-117). Internet based communication by politicians is mainly about information delivery and devoid of engagement opportunities (Ward & Lusoli 2005; Norton 2007; Williamson 2009).

There is a clear lack in the body of knowledge that calls for a broader analysis of how parliamentarians themselves perceive the Internet, their use of the web and their communication with the users (Williamson 2009). This research comes to fill this gap in the Israeli realm by comparing the websites' texts and interactive features, mainly *Person-Oriented/Human Interaction features* (contact features – henceforth) with the MKs open-questionnaires' answers, to try and understand why contact features are consistently dismissed from MKs websites.

Methodology

This research, mainly qualitative, used a mixed methods approach in two consecutive phases of data collection and an advanced stage of data analysis:

1. **Web Content Analysis** - the first stage took place on June-July 2009. During these two months, **all** 46 existing (as of summer 2009) MKs websites were analyzed using web content analysis. Parameters included demographics (e.g. age; gender; party affiliation; coalition/opposition affiliation; position type-governmental/ parliamentary) as well as interactive (interactivity rank), technical (e.g. updating rate; broken links; navigating tools; different browsers compatibility; disabled- population's accessibility) and design features (e.g. graphic design, multimedia use, visual and audio features integration).

However, this article does not refer to all parameters analyzed but only to the presence of interactive features.

In addition, sites' contents were reviewed to track expressions and phrases that refer to the issue of connecting the public. Whenever a direct reference to the websites' democratic goal was found, it was copied into one corpus. Details regarding the expression date (if mentioned), its URL and on-site location, were

collected. This research stage has been fully performed online. It is characterized by its *unobtrusive* nature. *Unobtrusive measures* do not involve direct elicitation of data from the research subjects and do not affect, in any way, research subjects. It is mainly used as an additional method to complement other data and triangulate research findings (Jick 1979; Lee 2000; Webb, et al., 2000).

2. **Open Questionnaires** – the second stage took place on November 2009 – February 2010. A request for an interview had been sent both by post and email / online feedback forms (via personal sites) to all MKs whose websites were analyzed during the first stage. Interestingly enough is the fact that all MKs who took the time to respond, had responded to my formal letters received at their chambers and not to the emails I sent, which were completely identical. General response rate (including refusals and excuses) was high (82%). Many MKs, who were willing to participate in the research, requested to have a written questionnaire instead of an interview, due to their busy schedule. As needed, email reminders were sent and telephone calls have been made.

Based on the first phase findings, two formats of open-ended self completion questionnaires were drafted and sent again by email to all of the informants. The questionnaires are quite alike. The few differences between the questionnaires were based on the separate positions each of the informants groups have: while one questionnaire format was designed for MKs/ Ministerial position holders; the second one was adapted to fit parliamentarians' staff members. As the parliamentarians are officially in charge of their sites' themes, they were asked about their world view regarding elected representatives' personal websites use, as a democratic tool for engaging the public; while staff members who daily operate these websites were requested to give data regarding the sites' average daily/ monthly unique entrances.

The first research phase was unobtrusive and offered an external perspective on MKs' attitudes towards personal websites use, through the texts which served as independent units of analysis; whereas, this phase enabled a more personal perspective. Using their own words, informants (MKs/staff) themselves referred to their web use, its practical meanings and the extent by which they perceive their sites as a 'Contact with the Public' platform. Through the questionnaires, Israeli parliamentarians' attitudes towards web political usage can be scrutinized.

3. upon completing the above mentioned research stages; websites' content analysis data were examined to detect online *media* and *contact features* as well as their frequency. Correspondingly, on-site texts and questionnaires' answers were analyzed to identify main themes deriving from the texts, through repeated words and phrases. To verify my results and in order to visualize information, I

have used digital methods tools¹ such as *Tag Cloud Generator*² and *Tag Cloud to Wordle*.³ Findings will be detailed below.

Findings

Sites' Texts – Online texts which refer to *connecting the public* can be found mainly under the pages: '*Home Page*'; '*About the Website*'; '*Welcome*' and '*Contact Page*'; these texts focus on the democratic level, while skipping the pragmatic-advertising affects the website has. Below are a few excerpts,⁴ taken from MKs websites, which reflect and illustrate the general tenor. The dominant concepts of *direct communication tool* and *the website as a two ways channel* manifest themselves in all citations (emphasized texts are as in the original texts):

Homepage - "**Welcome to my website**....this website is a direct communication tool between us; and I invite you to go through its different pages and get updated in my ongoing work".⁵

'About the site' page – "This site's aims are to provide current and comprehensive information regarding my parliamentary activity as well as to enable the establishment of another contact channel between you, the citizen, and your parliamentary representatives....Thanks to technological progress; I can be a part of establishing and invigorating connection between parliament and citizens, as well as enhancing your engagement in parliamentary and democratic procedures in the state of Israel. My hope is that the establishment of this site will give an added value to my social and legislative activities as well as increase my accessibility to you. I invite you to address me, whenever the need arises, whether in a public appeal or in a legislative idea – I will be happy to be at your service, at all times."⁶

A verbal analysis of the texts details the most prominent words, regarding communicating with constituents, in MKs' websites. These words / phrases are

¹. The Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) was launched in the University of Amsterdam. DMI is using the Internet itself in order to study it and is seen as a contribution to doing research into the "natively digital". See here - <http://www.digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/WebHome>

². Input tags and values to produce a tag cloud-
<http://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolTagCloudGenerator>.

³. This tool allows one to transform a normal tag cloud into a visual colored one
<http://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolTagCloudToWordle> .

⁴. More can be found in appendix no. 1.

⁵. MK Dr. Rachel Adato - <http://www.racheladato.co.il/>

⁶. MK Prof. Arie Eldad -

http://www.arieheldad.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=64

presented in Figure number 1. A visualization of the results in the shape of a *Tag Cloud* can be seen in figure number 2.

Figure No. 1: Most Prominent Phrases, regarding communicating with constituents, in MKs' sites

Words/ Phrases	Number of Appearances
Contact	25
Public	21
Direct	13
With you; Invite; Will be happy too	11
For you	9
Get in touch; Representative; Yours	8
I believe; Importance; Citizen	7
Democracy; Welcome; Address me	6
For your sake; Bills; Dialogue; Ideas & Comments	5
Between us; Tight; Continuous; At your service	4
Means; Close; Undertake; Inquiries; Together; Technology; Hope	3
Unmediated; Open; Email: Transparency; Your opinion	2
Communication; Real potential; Channel	1

Figure No. 2: Most Prominent Phrases in MKs' sites Tag Cloud



Questionnaires' Answers – Responsiveness rate to the questionnaires was average and reached 49% (22 questionnaires). Most questionnaires were answered by staff members (64%), the rest were answered by MKs themselves (36%). 4 informants (8%) answered both versions (MKs and Staff questionnaires). It should be mentioned that no significant differences were found between the attitudes displayed by MKs, Ministers and Staff members.

As in the case of the online texts, the questionnaire' answers were dominated by the narratives of **Dialogue** ('constituent-representative dialogue'; 'direct dialogue'; 'real dialogue') and **Contact / Connection** ('connection channel'; 'establish and reinforce connection'; 'the connection between the public and its representatives'; 'direct and unmediated contact'; 'strengthening the connection between us'; 'useful, stable, ongoing connection', etc.).

A verbal analysis of the texts details the most prominent words, regarding communicating with constituents, in the questionnaires' answers. These phrases are presented in Figure number 3. A visualization of the results in the shape of a *Tag Cloud* can be seen in figure number 4.

Figure No.3: Most Prominent Phrases, regarding communicating with constituents, in MKs questionnaires' answers

Words/ Phrases	Number of Appearances
Contacting the Public	48
Great Importance	21
Knesset Activity Report	19
Public Inquiries; Means; Update	18
Effective, Information, Public	14
Feedback; Platform	13
Newsletter/Mailing List	10
Bills; Efficiency; Accounting for	9
Transparency; Representatives-Constituents Communication; Elected Representative	8
Enhance Citizens' Engagement / Raising Awareness	7
Fluent Report; Comments; Circumventing Traditional Media	6
Accessibility; Messages Delivery	5
Democracy; Propaganda Tool; Availability; Deliberation; Instant Response; Lack of Public Awareness	4
Keeping in Touch; Expressing Opinions	3
Technology; Assistance	2
Attentive; Direct; Acquaintanceship; Meeting Place; Supporters' Database; Personal Talk	1

**Figure No. 4: Most Prominent Phrases in MKs' questionnaires' answers
Tag Cloud**

MKs_Questionnaires'_Answers_Prevalent_Phrases	Digital Methods Initiative	03 August	10
Map generated by tools.digitalmethods.net			

Contacting the Public (48)

Great Importance (21) Knesset Activity Report (19) Means (18) Update (18)
 Public Inquiries (18) Public (14) Information (14) Effective (14) Platform (13) Feedback (13)
 Newsletter/Mailing List (10) Bills (9) Accounting For (9) Efficiency (9) Representatives-Constituents Communication (8)
 Elected representative (8) Transparency (8) Enhance Citizens' engagement / Raising Awareness (7) Circumventing Traditional Media (6)
 Fluent Report (6) Comments (6) Messages Delivery (5) Accessibility (5) Instant response (4) Lack of Public Awareness (4) Deliberation (4) Availability (4) Propaganda Tool (4)
 Democracy (4) Expressing Opinions (3) Keeping in Touch (3) Technology (2) Assistance (2) Associating with (1) Interactive (1) Representatives Constituents Partnership (1) Public Relations (1)
 Personal Talk (1) Atterive (1) Direct (1) Acquaintanceship (1) Meeting Place (1) Supporters Database (1) Marketing Tool (1)

Probing even deeper into the answers referring to the issue of representatives-constituents connectivity had revealed a few interesting findings. As the questionnaires were open-ended, each MK had his own perspective which is unique; therefore we can only speak of trends and cannot generalize:

1. Most MKs acknowledged two main roles their websites fulfill. The first one is a *means of communication with the public* "The website initial goal is communicating the public; a discussion with the users; a means that enables citizens to talk with the elected representative".

The second role is attributed to *the site as a delivering information platform* quality. "As far as I'm concerned, the website is an excellent way to reach (voters-SHA), to unveil myself to more and more publics; to deliver messages through my website – it is some kind of an informative database regarding my activities, my statements, my positions, my references..." Some informants though, didn't refer at all to the site's role as a contact facilitator. They mentioned its roles as a *political marketing tool*, as a *working tool during primaries* and as a *PR tool*.

2. Many MKs are aware of the *democratic influence* a personal political site can have and mention it in their answers. They are even aware of their lagging behind their European and American fellows. "In the state of Israel, there isn't much awareness to this, contrary to the expectations, among parliamentarians and their assistants. The public itself is available and knows how to use the Internet

interface to contact his representatives"; "Improving the contact with the public and influencing his engagement in the public-political sphere."

3. Some informants referred specifically to *the importance of transparency* in the relationship between elected representatives and the public, and the role of the personal website in enabling that transparency. "I operate a website primarily to unveil my activity...My basic assumption is that an elected representative, must be publicly accountable, to achieve complete transparency. The Internet website enables that"; "The website is a platform for information delivery while keeping the principles of information transparency as well as complete accountability".

4. Interesting enough is the fact that some informants give their staff members free hand in operating the website, while others are well involved, on a daily basis, in the site's maintenance and happenings. Moreover, a few MKs had stated that they update their websites and other online applications by themselves from time to time. "I control every piece of information uploaded to the website and to my Facebook profile. I do not let anyone upload anything I do not know of...In my opinion, most MKs and ministers do not operate their websites by themselves. Especially on Facebook, I update my status by myself, but also on my website....it is easy and accessible, it is not complicated. On the contrary, if you have to ask others to do this for you, it complicates things"; "To my joy, MK...himself is very active regarding site's contents. He writes a blog over the site's platform; goes through my updates and corrects them, if necessary; updates his Twitter and thereby one of the site's sections is being updated as well."

5. Surprisingly, many MKs discern between their email and their website. Although their email address is published on their website, and many emails are sent as a natural sequence of a visit to the site, MKs refer to these tools as completely separated from one another. "We do not receive public feedback via the website, but definitely a lot of it via email". This preface is necessary in order to explain their answers regarding Website's feedback.

To the question: *Does the website have any contribution to your parliamentary/ ministerial work, especially regarding legislative work?* Most informants replied – *No, it does not.*

To the question: *Do you receive any public feedback (via website)?* They gave another negative answer "No, I hardly receive any public feedback" and "Not our site and not at this moment..." Still, reading their questionnaire' answers as a whole, it seems that the situation is completely different. "The best legislative ideas come through the website"; "Bills following public inquiries through the

website"; "Bills proposals are being received, from time to time, via website. These are being considered according to their content and relevance".

6. Another mix-up that is being revealed through the informants' answers is the merge they do between the party's website or the ministerial office website and their own personal website. This can be seen as some of them refer to their website and claim it is being updated on a daily basis, while practically it hasn't been updated for a few months. Another instance is a reference made to a specific feature such as forum or a newsletter service, which do not exist in the personal website.

7. One of the questions in the Staff members' version referred to data regarding site's unique entries. Most informants declared they have data but neglected to give it; only a few were willing to give vague details. Some disregarded the question, while others gave irrelevant answers. "We have primary data regarding number of entries, number of site's pages viewed, average time on site. We also have no. of entries by dates"; "Yes, we have data regarding number of entries, in hourly segmentation and not only by days and months..."; "There are data and they are satisfactory". Needless to say, that no figures were attached to these answers.

Sites' Interactive Features - As mentioned before, political websites interactive features can be divided into two different categories: *Media Interaction features* and *Human Interaction features* (Stromer-Galley 2000). While the first group of features do not require a human feedback and involve interaction with the medium itself; the second group features require human feedback and reaction in response to the users' input. The MKs' websites analysis came up with the following results:

Most prevalent media interactive features are the updates scroller (57%), photo galleries (54%),⁷ search engines (50%) and video clips (43%). Less widespread are audio files (26%), Newsletters and RSS feeds (24% each). The most uncommon media interactive features are polls, surveys, tags and online donation application (13% each) as can be seen in figure no. 5. A cross-section, which analyzed each and every site for itself, had suggested that most websites (30) integrate 0-3 media interactive features (65%). Only a third of the MKs had included 4-9 features in their websites (35%) as can be seen in Figure no. 6.

⁷. It should be mentioned that as almost all websites integrate pictures as part of their design, this feature refers to websites which integrate a separate section of photos.

Figure No. 5: Most Prevalent Media-Interaction Features in MKs Websites

Feature	Frequency / Percentage
News / Updates Scroller (Marquee)	27 / 57%
Photo Gallery	25 / 54%
Search Engine	23 / 50%
Video Clips	20 / 43%
Audio / Podcasting Files	12 / 26%
Mailing List / Newsletter Subscription	11 / 24%
RSS Feed	11 / 24%
Polls and Surveys	6 / 13%
Online Donations	6 / 13%
Tags	6 / 13%

Figure No. 6: Number of Media-Interaction Features in MKs Websites

Number of Features Per Site	Frequency / Percentage
9	2 / 4%
8	1 / 2%
7	3 / 7%
6	4 / 9%
5	2 / 4%
4	4 / 9%
3	14 / 31%
2	6 / 13%
1	8 / 17%
0	2 / 4%

The average number of features per site is 3.45. Meaning, less than 4 media-interaction features per site.

It is important to note that while analyzing the presence of human interaction features in MKs website, I have referred only to features which enable **online** contact. This means that I have deliberately disregarded features which refer to offline contact with the representative (such as office address and phone numbers); as well as features which only contributes to the representative himself (such as online donations). By doing so I wanted to examine how the website itself is being utilized as an online platform to contact constituents, while overlooking its 'online billboard' characteristics. The empirical analysis suggests that integration of *contact features* in Israeli parliamentarians' websites is very

moderate. Most prevalent contacting applications are email address (65%), online feedback/contact form (59%) and users' comments system (54%), as can be seen in figure no. 7. A cross-section, which analyzed each and every site for itself, had suggested that most websites (35) integrate 0-2 contact features (76%). Less than quarter of MKs had included 3-4 contact features in their websites (24%) as can be seen in figure no. 8.

Figure No. 7: Most Prevalent Online Contact Features in MKs Websites

Feature	Frequency / Percentage
Email Address	30 / 65%
Online Feedback Form	27 / 59%
Comments Feature	25 / 54%
On-Site Responds to Citizens' Questions	5 / 11%
Online Forms for Volunteers/ Activists	3 / 6%
Discussion Forum	2 / 4%
Chat	1 / 2%

Figure No. 8: Number of Contact Features in MKs Websites

Number of Features Per Site	Frequency / Percentage
4	1 / 2%
3	10 / 22%
2	21 / 46%
1	13 / 28%
0	1 / 2%

The average number of online contacting features per website is only **1.93**. Meaning, less than 2 contact features per site.

Conclusions

Empirical results show that MKs' websites concentrate mainly on the informative level and less on the engagement level. In addition, the websites include *sticky* features. A site has a sticky quality, if it provides the users with reasons to return and not settle for a single visit (Morris 2000; Jackson 2003). Media-interaction features contribute to the website's *stickiness* as well as keeping it updated and altered constantly. However, online texts as well as questionnaire' answers came up with dominant engagement narratives, as informants exclaim that their websites' prior aim is reaching out to the public.

Apparently, these findings are incompatible with one another. A real dissonance arises between the manifested text narratives and the relatively low online contact features appearing on MKs' websites. The scarcity of online contact features in politicians' websites had been already documented by many researchers (e.g. Stromer-Galley 2000; Jackson 2003; Ward & Lusoli 2005; Francoli 2008; Vegyte, Malinauskiene & Petrauskas 2008; Zittel 2008).

The novel research aspect stems from its ability to compare the online texts and contact features with the MKs responsiveness rate and questionnaires' answers and look for any discrepancies. For example, there were many MKs who praised the importance of Internet as a '*means of communication between constituents and representatives*' in their site's texts, whereas they did not even bother responding to citizens' emails sent to them (Shani 2005; Shalev 2007). Other MKs, who declared in their questionnaire answers that the relationship with the public is the main goal of their website, had hardly integrated any contact feature on that site. How can we try and explain this incompatibility in findings? Beyond the standard explanations which refer to the limited financial and administrative resources parliamentarians have, a few other interpretations can be suggested.

The most obvious interpretation refers only to the local intra-Israeli politics and concerns its system of representation. As Israeli elections are based on nation-wide proportional representation; voters vote for a party list, and not for a particular person on the list. The number of seats which every list receives in the Knesset is proportional to the number of voters who voted for it. General elections do not include any regional element; therefore, candidates as well as serving MKs are less motivated to contact citizens than their American, British and German colleagues. As they are not connected to a specific geographical region they do not feel any obligation towards predefined constituents. On the other hand, as this research, referred only to those MKs who **did** operate a website, it seems that they do have some incentive to do so, or else they wouldn't have maintained a site in the first place. The next explanations can be generalized and might as well fit parliamentarians from different countries and not only Israeli MKs.

Questionnaires' answers suggest that many MKs are still bewildered regarding optimal use of the website as a connective medium. Meaning, although they intend to use the site as an engaging and empowering platform, they fail to do so, due to their lacking knowledge. A support to this conclusion can be found in the fact that Internet savvy MKs, on an individual basis make a brilliant use of the website both on the information level and the engagement level. Therefore, it is highly recommended that MKs will receive further instruction and training, preferably on a collective basis and as a mandatory activity, as part of the parliamentary schedule.

A reasonable explanation to this discordance may be attributed to the way in which the notion of connection between representatives and constituents is perceived by parliamentarians: they may perceive the mere online presence, through a personal website as a platform to communicate with their constituents, although this communication is only one sided. Therefore, they feel that maintaining a website as a source of reliable information regarding their activities and duties, serves the public. Continuing this line of thought, these sites enhance the political actors' transparency and accountability towards the public. So far, in their opinion, it seems that this is more than enough.

Another reasoning relates directly to Web 2.0 phase in which we all operate. Web 2.0 offers varied Internet applications which enable networking and connecting people, particularly social networks sites (SNS) as *Facebook*. Many parliamentarians around the world, including Israeli MKs, use these applications, correspondingly to their websites' operation. And as a website maintenance is not as simple as a social network account maintenance and mostly requires the continuous assistance of staff members, parliamentarians tend to move their online personal '*engaging the public*' activities to the social networks sites. While websites remain their primary informative source, the new political focus of attention is in the social networks sites. By linking all of their online applications to one another, they make sure that users will be aware of their websites (as central information sources) as well as their SNS profiles, Microblogging accounts, etc.

It should be noted that the methodological framework this research had established alludes rethinking regarding further researches' design. As the empirical findings (which demonstrate the real online practice) are incompatible with the MKs' declarations (regarding their wills and intentions) both online and in writings, it might be a good idea to combine at least two methods in order to triangulate findings whenever representatives' proclamations are concerned.

Summing up, MKs personal attitudes as reflected through the questionnaires and online texts shed light on the empirical results and might explain them from a different angle than the one we were used to.

Appendix No. 1 - Contact Themed MKs Sites' Texts

Homepage - "**Welcome**, I am glad that you have chosen to visit my home site, this is where you'll be exposed to all of my public and parliamentary activities...It is very important for me to hear your opinions and thoughts...In this context, I would like to mention the Internet's role as a most important tool in the connection between the public and its elected representatives. I have found out that this medium, wonderfully serves both sides; I receive more public appeals and answer them in a more efficient manner and quicker than before. I draw your attention to my 'Get in Touch' page...**At your service any time...My mail** (a link to an email address- SHA)." ⁸

Homepage - "This site's aim is to maintain a useful, stable, ongoing connection with the public. I promise to be an open ear, a watching eye and, when needed, also your talking mouth. Yours, Israel Hason." ⁹

Homepage – "Greetings and welcome to my website! ...This site is for you – each and every citizen who wants to voice his opinion, deliver a request, a question, a comment or a response. I will be happy to be in touch – and serve as your mouth in the Knesset. Yours, Ronit." ¹⁰

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