

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



Chamber of Local Authorities

15th PLENARY SESSION
CPL(15)2REP
6 May 2008

E-tools: a response to the needs of local authorities

Alexander Drobotov, Russian Federation (L, SOC)
Etienne Van Vaerenbergh, Belgium (L, ILDG)

Explanatory memorandum
Committee on Culture and Education

Summary:

New technologies and a variety of e-tools offer increasing possibilities for interaction between citizens and their elected representatives. The changing face of politics and policy-formation is a direct result of the development of the Internet and other communication technologies. The increasing potential of such technologies affords new methods for consulting voters on electoral issues, legislation, political decisions and policy implementation.

The constant evolution of the online world is a cause of concern for many politicians who find themselves confronted with the need to keep abreast of developments which arrive with ever increasing frequency and complexity.

While some politicians have taken to the new technologies and online tools such as blogs, they have been less successful in adapting their working methods to realise the potential of such tools. The promise of a free exchange of ideas on online discussion fora raised many hopes, but these have rarely been realised due to poor implementation. Proposals made on such fora rarely seem to have an impact on policy formation, leading to public disenchantment.

The development of the use of new technologies should be more carefully managed to ensure that they lead to a new approach to politics and improves the relationship between voters and politicians.

The rapporteurs propose that politicians choose projects that are relatively easy to manage, such as multi-function blog platforms. The shared goal of citizens and elected representatives should be to increase the transparency of political decision-making leading to wider political participation and commitment.

R : Chamber of Regions / L : Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG : Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD : Group European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC : Socialist Group of the Congress
NR : Member not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress



1. Politics in the Internet era	3
1.1. The power of New Information and Communication Technologies	3
1.1.1. <i>Latest trends in technology and applications / Future perspectives – Converging technologies</i>	3
1.2. Influence of the medium on the policy making process	3
1.2.1. <i>From mass media to interactive media</i>	3
1.2.2. <i>New forms of political discourse and practice in the Internet era</i>	4
2. ICTs enhancing politicians everyday work	5
3. Online tools and applications for local politics and politicians	6
3.1. Convergence of technologies and online integration – a difficult transition phase	
3.2. Specific ICT tools, recommended applications and impact assessment	7
3.2.1. <i>E-mail</i>	7
3.2.2. <i>Online newsletter</i>	8
3.2.3. <i>Blogs</i>	9
3.2.4. <i>Chat and VoIP clients</i>	10
3.2.5. <i>Online multimedia content sharing (eg. Youtube, Flickr)</i>	11
3.2.6. <i>Second life and virtual worlds</i>	11
3.2.7. <i>Online forums</i>	11
3.2.8. <i>Polls</i>	12
3.2.9. <i>Online surveys/questionnaires</i>	12
3.2.10. <i>e-petitions</i>	13
3.2.11. <i>e-vote</i>	13
3.2.12. <i>Social networks, online communities</i>	13
3.2.13. <i>Groupware (Yahoo groups, Google groups)</i>	14
3.2.14. <i>Wiki platforms / collaborative drafting</i>	14
3.2.15. <i>Full featured open source CMS platforms (Plone, Drupal, Joomla)</i>	14
3.3. Matching needs, tools and outcomes	15
4. From adapting politicians to adapted technologies - what is missing	17
5. Integrating online with off-line – avoiding the “virtualisation” of local politics	
6. Conclusions and recommendations – the way forward	

1. Politics in the Internet era

1.1. The power of New Information and Communication Technologies

Information and communication are at the centre of any cultural, economic social and political activity in the broad sense, be it at local, national or International level. Throughout history, as new information and communications tools and methods emerged such as printing, radio and TV broadcasting, telephone and fax, the very nature of this social cultural economic or political activity was deeply affected and often transformed. The widespread use of the Internet and the infinite number of applications that emerged with it, are in turn completely transforming the landscape once again.

1.1.1. *Latest trends in Technology and Applications / Future perspectives* – *Converging technologies*

Initially an elite technology for few academic and military institutions, in the late 60s the Internet has rapidly evolved into an extremely powerful tool, aggregating almost all information and communication modalities and technologies seen in the past, while being made available to an exponentially increasing proportion of the population¹. It is a fact that technologies and media such as printed books, press, magazines, radio, TV, telephone and fax can all be achieved today through online applications. Beyond reintegrating traditional information and communication technologies, the Internet has given rise to completely new modalities of communication across the globe, such as chat, video conference, virtual communities, 3D worlds and so on. The impact of this powerful convergence of technologies will grow even faster as the means to access the Internet evolve from the predominantly PC based platforms today to more versatile, less cumbersome, less expensive devices. Internet connectivity is becoming a mainstream feature on a great variety of consumer devices, such as TVs, game consoles, mobile phones and handheld media players, making it even more accessible to the average user. The power of the Internet to deliver on our ever greater Information and communication needs grows exponentially with the increase of Internet users² and technological breakthroughs .

As we are overcoming technological and other issues such as "critical mass of users online" that kept the Internet until recently out of the mainstream of economic, cultural, social and political activities, we see a radical transformation of these sectors of activity, gradually abandoning more traditional ways of Information and Communication in favour of Internet based platforms. There has been an explosion of the online economy, the emergence of online communities and social networks counting hundreds of millions members, the online representation and transformation of much cultural content and activities, a massive shift of politics to the online sphere. With the ever increasing speed of change, it is likely that what is happening today is just a foretaste of the major transformations to come.

1.2. Influence of the medium on the policy-making process

The information and communication medium has impacted dramatically on the way politics and policy making has been carried out through time. The Internet represents a bigger shift in communication modalities than most of the previous changes. The evolution from one2one to large scale one2many communication (print, radio, TV) is making a decisive impact on modern civilisation. The move to massive many2many communication and exchange through the Internet will have even deeper effects on it.

1.2.1. *From Mass Media to Interactive Media in politics*

Much has been written on how the Radio and TV has influenced and reshaped politics in the 20th century. The ease with which politicians can reach across great distances (physical, cultural and ideological) to talk directly to each and every citizen has a significant impact on electoral results and citizen mobilisation. It is revolutionising the modalities and the essence of politics itself, bringing it closer to a communication and marketing technique.

The era of "online politics" that has been emerging since late 90s, is in turn revolutionising the modalities and essence of politics, offering for the first time the possibility and the channels for

¹ The number of Internet users is roughly estimated to 1.3 billion equivalent to 20% world population
[<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>]

² The value of any network grows exponentially with the numbers of its users

citizens to massively respond to the politicians, question and criticise policy or make new policy proposals in public. For the first time there is a tool that allows for dialogue and debate to take place in an unprecedented scale. We seem to be moving gradually from the passive citizen, recipient of "One to Many" televised politics, to the potentially active citizen engaged in a "Many to Many" dialogue and debate online with politicians and peer citizens.

These are of course far from being dominant trends yet, as the Internet has still a limited outreach to specific parts of the population (typically lower education, income and higher age populations) and is unevenly distributed across the planet with the poorest areas of the Globe and their population being still invisible on the map of Internet today³.

Nevertheless the exponential rate of the Internet user base growth and the constant evolution of the technological supports and devices towards cheaper, more accessible mainstream solutions, suggest that, in the near future, the generalized use of such technologies and devices will match current TV and mobile-phone penetration rates.

1.2.2. New forms of political discourse and practice in the Internet era

We are already witnessing a shift in politics and policy-making, directly related to the emergence of the Internet, its users and communities, as an incredible power that is able to impact directly on election outcomes, law-making, policy decisions and implementation. The ever-changing landscape and dynamics of the online world is creating a lot of stress among policy makers and politicians who are faced with having to master yet another variable.

There are many examples of how the Internet can inject fluidity into politics: an online shared video (e.g. YouTube) can present a political candidate in an unfortunate (or excellent) moment caught on the camera of a mobile phone, deciding his future and career, creating an instant wave of negative or positive reactions online, taken up by the mass media. This type of unpredictable avalanche effects and chain reactions are hard to be mastered in the usual terms and methods used by politics and politicians in the 20th Century. Those politicians who recognised the potential of the Internet, who had an insight into its potential, have been able to capitalise on the vast online communities to bring their case forward, raise funds for their campaigns or causes online, mobilise citizens on-line and organise online real (offline) actions.

The presidential elections in France 2007 and USA in 2004 and 2008, are good examples of how much the mastering of on-line tools are considered to be crucial factors for the success of a campaign or even the outcome of elections.

Traditional mass media, trying to remain at the centre stage of political communication, are paying ever more attention to the Internet and its group dynamics. Online citizen journalisms, blogs, real time video-conferencing, sharing online videos, reader's feedback and exchange of opinions are now commonplace in most mainstream mass-media websites and often cited in TV and the printed press. The most advanced and forward-looking mass media companies are rushing to adopt the latest Internet tools and trends however disruptive these might be to their traditional value chains and processes (e.g. the BBC adopting Internet TV as opposed to traditional broadcasting and programming), in fear of being left out.

Despite the fact that access to the Internet and skills required are unevenly distributed across our societies, the possibility given to an increasingly great number of citizens to discuss, debate, present ideas, share information online, is thought to democratize politics in practice and transcend the unidirectional nature of mass media based political communication that became the norm in the 20th century.

The Internet has become over the years and remains a privileged place for the free exchange of ideas and acquiring support for causes that are not reflected or even favoured by the mainstream media and politics⁴. An example of this was the campaign against the European Constitution that was carried with great success in France, providing online the necessary space for public discussion, since most mainstream media and parties were clearly positioned in favour of the Constitution.

³ 2002 Internet users Distribution, <http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=336>

⁴ For how long, it remains to be seen, given the never ending mergers of online content providers, and Information gate keepers such as Google, Yahoo etc. Of course Individuals and others will continue to publish their own ideas, the issue is how easily these will be accessible through the main information points that are big portals and search engines. Nevertheless it is also true that the phenomenal increase of social networks and online communities (such as Facebook, MySpace and others), the "word of mouth" still plays and will play a very important role in disseminating information and ideas.

The Internet also allows for processes that transcend traditional political mechanisms, cutting through party structures or other policy formulation and policy making mechanisms. An individual, not belonging to any traditional political institution, can create sufficient support for his cause online and become an influential opinion leader quickly and with much less effort than would be needed if he had to work his way through the traditional structures and methods.

These innovative but fundamentally disruptive new information and communication tools and modalities can also prove to be beneficial to the traditional political players and structures. Their intelligent and consistent use of online tools and platforms can reinvigorate and rejuvenate their functioning, helping to attract younger generations and non-partisan citizens to the party, emerging as a new open transparent and innovative space for dialogue and debate on essential issues and policy options.

2. ICTs enhancing politicians' everyday work

The Internet and ICTs are rapidly becoming essential tools for the modern day politician, facilitating not only his access to crucial information but multiplying his communication channels and extending his outreach far beyond what was previously possible.

With online news aggregators and efficient search tools at his disposal, he has now real time access to high quality information on both local and global issues. With easy tools to publicise his views such as blogs, online newsletters, podcasts and video-casts, all of which allow for real time readers' feedback, he can better communicate and exchange views with citizens, fellow politicians, civil society organisations, business and experts, through his Internet enabled PC and the use of a few simple and free online tools.

If a more structured discussion space is needed to tackle important issues, online discussion forums can be created for free. He can also better organise his contacts, agenda and work flows, using free online tools, ranging from small personal information managers' PC applications to full-scale open-source Customer Relation Management (CRM) systems.

All in all, there now exists a fully-fledged suite of web-based or web-enabled tools and applications that are for the most part free and relatively easy to use. However, the skills and time required to deploy and maintain such tools can become extensive when they are added up: politicians may lack both the skills and the time.

The exponential increase in the technical literacy required to make optimum use of technology has become a serious barrier towards the generalised adoption of advanced Internet tools in the daily practice of politics and politicians work, with few exceptions.

In some cases, parties try to remedy this by providing ready-made platforms or "pages" under their own web-systems, providing some of these tools as well as the training to go with it. In most cases politicians themselves turn to private companies (smaller or bigger) to deliver the tools and online presence, with mixed results, ranging from plain old-fashioned online profiles (close to the transposition online of an election campaign leaflet), to fully-fledged web-portals packed with the latest web-tools and functionalities.

In many cases, politicians may be motivated by the aim of presenting themselves as modern and in touch with the latest trends (very much appreciated by younger generations), rather than a genuine desire to change their way of working.

3. Online tools and applications for local politics and politicians, but for what?

Some politicians have rushed into new technologies and trendy online tools (such as blogs and social networks) without being able to deliver anything new or innovative in the way that policy is created and implemented, with little achieved other than an air of modernity being attributed to the politician. Badly implemented online platforms, introduced without any serious thinking and strategy, can actually have a negative impact on a politician's image. Promising a free exchange of ideas with citizens by opening-up a forum and not following up and using citizen input in your policy formulations can create a great deal of frustration among citizens, who conclude that they have been wasting their time. Technology by itself is not an innovation factor: using the latest technology available does not automatically create better politicians or better policies.

New information and communication technologies act as multipliers and magnifying loops of the inherent characteristics of the processes to which they are applied. Adding the latest technology to a bureaucratic administrative process will just make its bureaucratic aspects more prominent; bringing inefficient processes and workflows online may simply serve to make these even more inefficient, having also spent considerable time and money to reproduce them online, along with their irrationalities and flaws. Any change in technology has to be preceded or accompanied by a process re-engineering and a review phase to ensure that the new technologies will deliver increased efficiency and effectiveness.

“A framework for change”

	Old Process	New Process
Old Technology		X
New Technology	X	✓

Dr. Costis Toregas / G.W. University, June 2006 Ermoupolis Seminars, Greece.

There are ways to use the web and ICT tools to achieve far more than just expanding politicians' outreach and multiplying communication channels, or providing them with a modern image. ICTs and the web, if combined with a specific methodology, can lead to a complete revolutionizing of the political process from agenda-setting to the actual implementation and evaluation of policies, with increased effectiveness and efficiency and meaningful politician-to-citizen relationships.

The challenge is for the politician to realise how new information and communication technologies can transform and re-engineer his way of working. The real innovation and added-value in using and investing in online tools ICTs, is to empower the politician to deliver better informed policy more efficiently and effectively than was possible before, while re-engaging in essential exchange with citizens.

Going beyond the politician himself, the widespread adoption of such practices, tools and methods throughout society, could eventually provide important qualitative and quantitative enhancements to our democracies as a whole and lead to re-engineering the very functioning of our democracies and democratic governance.

eDemocracy, the use of ICTs and web technology to enhance our democracies in terms of more and better democracy, is becoming increasingly promising both in theory and practice, with academics and researchers working across the world on its concepts and implementation, many projects being carried out, and many institutions looking to it as a potential solution to their increased loss of touch with citizens and members, often resulting in their own legitimacy being questioned.

It has been shown that, when used properly, ICTs and the web can offer concrete solutions to renowned flaws and insufficiencies observed in democratic processes today, such as lack of transparency and accountability, citizen apathy, disengagement and disenfranchisement from the political processes and rising abstention in elections, that political institutions refer to as the problem of "democratic deficit".

Our plea here is to explore the new possibilities offered to politicians and policy makers today through ICTs and the Internet, not only in terms of enhancing their capacity to access and disseminate information, not only as a personal promotion tool, but also in terms of new possibilities offered to educate, re-engage and actively involve the citizens, provide greater transparency and accountability

to politics, improve the quality of decision-making through deliberation and exchange among stakeholders.

The politician is an essential player in any healthy democracy, and the local politician, being closer to the citizen, has an important leadership role to play in introducing such new tools and practice, setting the pace for the rest.

We will now to examine a series of tools that are on offer today, analyzing their strength and weaknesses to deliver the specific required outcomes. It should be kept in mind that the same ICT tools can have very different results depending on the way these are used and combined, the purpose of their deployment and the methodology followed.

3.1. Convergence of technologies and online integration – a difficult transition phase

The situation is complicated by the fact that these tools and technologies are continuously evolving and rapidly changing. The tools that, 5 or 10 years ago, were quite distinct both in their technological implementation and purpose they served, tend nowadays to blend-in with one another. The same essential functionalities and services can be offered today through different but increasingly convergent technologies, while new possibilities emerge every day. We are also witnessing the interweaving of several of these tools in integrated platforms, increasingly offered as free services by the biggest IT and web companies, in their effort to keep their customers' needs covered entirely through their own solutions, competing for a dominant market share.

This comes in response to a pressing need for rationalisation and better management of information and content retrieval, creation, organisation, archiving and exchange in face of the multitude of separate and very distinct applications, systems and platforms that are in use today.

This confusing and inefficient situation, which individual users and large corporations and administrations are facing alike, is partly due to major software houses imposing, since the early days, their own conception of separate applications and filing systems for content creation (document spreadsheets), information exchange and communication systems (e-mail, chat etc) and information retrieval (web browsing, favourites, bookmarks), transposing old ways of doing things and traditional process flows to new technologies, with little effort to re-engineer processes in order to really benefit from new technologies. Old-fashioned, time-consuming and inefficient systems were simply translated in software applications, instead of being streamlined and enhanced through the possibilities offered by ICTs.

Thus we are today faced with fragmented information, created and managed by different applications and kept in separated information silos which make it hard for the average user to keep track and re-connect the various pieces of information into a single knowledge space. This creates the feeling known as "information overload", faced by simple users and major organisations alike, unable to make the most of the information they possess. This has led to many organisations to keep, in parallel to their electronic and "modern" systems, the old-fashioned but "reliable" paper filing systems, creating even more confusion. As a consequence it is often the case that, for example, e-mails are still printed and treated by users' (and major administrations alike) as traditional documents, reducing their inherent potential and electronic content management possibilities to those of an electronic conveyor of paper documents, creating thus a double system of electronic and paper filing and archiving, doubling the effort required to manage and maintain it. It is admittedly difficult to change so radically both the work flows and the very nature of the information exchange system to a virtualisation of both, and thus double systems are very common today.

These inefficiencies and knowledge fragmentation are increasingly being addressed by all encompassing and integrated web-based solutions being proposed by Google, Yahoo and more recently Microsoft and others, in an effort to reunify content and exchange flows in a single environment that is easily accessible and manageable by the average user.

Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, along with a fleet of smaller yet very innovative companies, are offering integrated information communication and management platforms online for anyone to use for free. These include web-based office productivity suites (documents, spreadsheets etc) e-mail, chat, telephony over the Internet, sharing of documents, pictures and videos, online groups and forums, blogs, document and spreadsheets online creation and sharing, private and shared calendars, contacts and to-do list management, all of which are bundled with extensive Internet search tools and portals, providing customised information and news according to the user's needs.

Keeping these factors and convergence trends in perspective, we will have a closer look at the existing tools and platforms and how these can interact with each other to offer a comprehensive toolset for the modern day politician.

3.2. Specific ICT Tools, recommended applications and impact assessment

Given the various tools available today, a concrete methodology and strategy is needed to create the right mix of these, based on what politicians need in each case. While it is clear that there cannot be here a "one size fits all" approach, we will make a brief overview of the most common of these tools in use today, providing insight and hints on what their strengths and weaknesses are, and for what uses they are best suited.

3.2.1. *E-mail*

E-mail probably remains the online tool most used today. It is estimated that more than 75% of information exchanged online (in terms of quantity) is exchanged through e-mail (IDC). In its traditional form (central e-mail servers combined with software clients on PCs such as Outlook or Thunderbird), it has the advantages of being able to store information locally that can be consulted also off-line. It has the disadvantage of fragmenting information, encapsulating parts of it in 100s if not 1000s of different messages and folders the user creates, making information hard to retrieve and to recompile in a unified knowledge or information system⁵.

It is true nevertheless that e-mail is currently undergoing radical transformations in its very essence, as web-based e-mail services are becoming more popular and increasingly reliable and offer the same if not more features than traditional mail. Major companies, such as Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft (hotmail), have for many years offered free web-based e-mail services, but these are increasingly integrated with a whole series of new online tools, such as Online calendar, web-based groupware, Chat clients and Online multimedia content management systems, creating the basis for full-featured integrated platforms, combining all of the above. The advantage in using some of the web-mail services lies in advanced tagging and search features that allow for easy and fast access to content created or circulated with e-mail, reducing to some extent the issues faced with traditional e-mail clients. Their robustness is also increasing, with free email storage capacity reaching many gigabytes, and limitations of the past gradually being solved (such as accounts being "cleaned" when not used in a period of X months). All this, along with their efficiency in dealing with unsolicited e-mails (spam), has led many users to rely entirely on such web-based e-mail services.

For the average user and average politician, e-mail is still the easiest online tool to use and master as it resembles older information transactions such as postal mail, telex or fax, with a sender, a recipient and a receipt. Nevertheless the extensive use and abuse of mail for marketing purposes this last decade has created a strong and generalized reactivity towards unsolicited messages (spam), even if it comes from your local politician, which limits its acceptability as a marketing tool for politicians.

Of course, as mail being used by the vast majority of Internet users, it remains an extremely important tool to deliver a great variety of content that citizens or others ask for, from simple alerts and notifications on some event or important piece of information news, to full featured multimedia and interactive content (including streaming video and sound). If mail is used through a mail list system that the user is registered with, it should allow an easy way for the user to unsubscribe.

It can be a very useful tool as a high visibility desktop alert system, consulted by most users on a daily basis, while offering a high dissemination potential (can be easily forwarded or replied to). Nevertheless using it for political communication can have drawbacks as e-mail is considered a personal information tool and space by users. Political communication if unsolicited can be seen as spam. Spammer is an attribute that certainly reflects badly on any politician.

E-mail is also not suitable for real conversations online as information is stored in a fragmented non interconnected way, making it more efficient for ad-hoc messaging. The "reply to all" and mail-lists

⁵ Adopting the simple but archaic (in our view) folder structure to categorise and store information, it makes managing and retrieving information in mailboxes quite a complex task, having to browse through 10ths of folders, having often to remember huge folder trees. It is a fact that any content item (text, audio, video mixed content etc) can contain references and information about several different issues, very difficult to describe on the title of the document or title of the folders currently used to categorise and retrieve the Information. A system where the content itself will contain several descriptors or Tags of what it contains and the context of the information provided, makes looking for specific information across multiple sources and information / content types much easier and efficient.

methods often used to create a sense of discussion among a group of people becomes very quickly unusable as one loses any thread of the discussion, after a certain amount of replies. It is still used nevertheless as a remnant of early Internet times where e-mail was a revolutionary way to converse with others across the world until then only possible by telephone conferencing or real life meetings. There are today much more efficient tools for these task as we will see below.

3.2.2. *Online Newsletter*

The newsletter has been around since paper-only times, and has played an important role ever since. We see nevertheless that often there is a misconception about the online- Newsletter being just the traditional newsletter delivered by mail to be printed and read, instead of being distributed by post-mail or hand delivery. The online newsletter should be much more than just a PDF to be printed. Of course the contents of the newsletter is what is most important at the end, but the form, look and feel, can play a very important role in the success or failure of a newsletter to become an important information and communication tool for the politician.

Usually newsletters are distributed by e-mail either in full content or as a link of the newsletter posted on a website. The issue is of course that there is a lot of competition for the users' attention inside the mailbox and online. It is quite possible that the user receives an important amount of newsletters, some of which are never reads. In order to become a successful tools, the newsletters must bear an easy to identify and appealing message title, they must be kept short and the messages clear, visually appealing, offer interactivity (active multimedia content, links to sites etc), include some navigation if it expands in more than one page.

Newsletters are currently facing great competition in delivering news from other tools that are increasingly becoming popular, such as RSS feeds. The logic behind RSS feeds is that it allows for users to automatically receive latest news posted in sites blogs and other online information sources they pick as being of interest. RSS feeds are more suitable for real time news delivery to users. The added value of a newsletter is more to provide the aggregated strategic overview and insight over specific issues rather than providing real time news as they happen..

Periodicity of a newsletter is less important than the actual information quality and exclusiveness. It is better to delay an issue until there is something important to talk about rather that decide on periodicity (weekly, monthly etc) and try later on to find meaningful information to put in it. The readers' time is as precious as yours. If you send once or twice a newsletter that is poor in content and added value offered, it will be overlooked in the future even if you have very important things to say.

Beyond the hard part of collecting or sharing really valuable information and knowledge, editing the texts for maximum clarity and so on, actually creating an online newsletter that looks good and delivers rich content in any e-mail client or web-mail system can be a tricky business, requiring skill or specialized software. If well implemented, it can become a powerful communication tool for the politician and an information tool for citizens, delivering politicians' insights on important issues.

On the other hand it needs a lot of work to deliver high quality information in a high quality format online. It is best not to make a newsletter or to make fewer issues rather than provide poor quality that will reflect badly on the sender. It is facing increased competition by other information tools and platforms.

3.2.3. *Blogs*

Blogs have become trendy and are the preferred online platforms for many politicians across the world, being simple to set up and maintain. The innovative aspects of blog platforms such as Blogger by Google, Wordpress and others compared to traditional web sites, lie in the fact that they are offered and hosted for free, they are very easy to set-up and use for anyone with basic skills and it allows visitors to comment on what is published on it, creating a basic space for discussion.

In the early days blogs were used mainly as personal online text based journals or notebooks where people wrote about their interests and ideas or anything really they wanted to share with others, or were used just as an online place to store ideas for themselves.

Despite the fact that these tools have evolved enormously these past years, most politicians use them still as an online public display of monologues on different issues they deem of interest to

citizens, fellow politicians, the press etc. In most cases blogs are still used as a “modern” way to put in public their “press releases” they used to fax to the media.

There are of course important exceptions, and the communication culture is changing, making way for more and better use of web based and ICT tools.

More and more politicians understand that the power of the Internet lies in its potential interactivity offered, and not just in the simplicity and ease of delivering more one-way communication and information to the citizen through modern looking tools and distribution channels.

The Blog can allow the politician to create space for open exchange of views and ideas with citizens and others he might never have met otherwise, thus complementing and enriching in a way the opinions collected through his real life contacts and exchanges.

Of course there is the danger that citizens that will show up and comment on a politician's blog, are often interested parties (even lobbies) that found a new (and much easier) way to influence politics, posing as independent citizens. This is why it is important to keep it as a complementary tool.

Blogs allow politicians to detail their views and opinions in ways not possible through traditional media while allowing for citizen feed back. This is a positive step towards bridging the politician to citizen gap, but it is not sufficient to change citizens' attitude towards politics and politicians. The fact that you expose your daily life or concerns or thoughts is important, but does not change the way decisions are made or how citizen participate in the decision making processes, not even how transparent these processes are.

Blogs were never conceived as dialogue platforms either. If politicians want to engage into real debate and exchange of ideas with large numbers of citizens, they need to use more powerful tools, such as for example online discussion forums, where the focus is more on the exchange and debate on an equal foot, rather than just commenting on the views of the politician.

Nevertheless blogs can also be used by groups of people sharing common interests or ideas, the so called group or community blogs. These are the same as individual or personal blogs but with a group of authors contributing to a theme or a discussion topic, rather than a person sharing his views on everything (thematic vs. personal). This can be useful for politicians as well as it can allow collaborative publishing of articles and thoughts around shared concerns or issues, potentially building up an important corpus of knowledge and policy threads.

Blogs are also important to politicians as a source of information. With a very vast amount of journalists, experts, interest groups, civil society organisations and others writing about almost anything, there are good chances to find very authoritative and high quality information and insight on about anything, on some blog, rather than on mainstream media outlets. The issue is of course that it can be very time consuming to browse for this information with blogs now being counted in the millions. Of course there are powerful search engines and indexers of blogs (e.g. <http://technorati.com/>) that make things easier. The fact is that interesting blogs are often known and shared by "word of mouth" among politicians interested in specific issues and looking for specific authors they know have a particular insight. (Journalists, experts, advisors to policy makers, or fellow politicians etc)

Once the good blogs are spotted they can be harnessed with RSS feed systems, that can in turn bring to the politicians desktop PC or even mobile phone the latest information posted on these, without having to actually look for them on the web.

The early online blog services were quite limited, providing for just text uploading and commenting. Today, pushed by their immediate enormous success, they offer a much greater variety of tools and features, while remaining free of charge. This has led to online blog platforms being used as small scale but fully featured and versatile online content management systems packed with modules and features, offering an attractive all-in-one “do-it-yourself” information and communication platform. There are limitations compare to full-featured and robust content management systems, but blog-based platforms gain much from their ease of use and easy personalisation of the interface, making them accessible to non-technical users.

There is now the possibility also to include in blogs, photo streams, video and calendars of events, while content and published stories can be tagged so as to make searching easier and more intuitive using keywords. This opens up opportunities for politicians as well as offering a comprehensive information platform to cover their Information and communication needs.

With an increasing number of Internet and thus blog enabled mobile phones and PDAs now on the market, mobile blogging has taken up allowing for both reading and contributing on the move in real

time. The blogs are thus becoming an increasingly important reference for politicians, outpacing many of the traditional or online media powerhouses in delivering timely and sharp information.

3.2.4. *Chat and VoIP clients*

"Chat" allows for real time exchanges among a limited number of persons over the Internet. These are usually software clients used from a PC, but they can be also web-based. Initially very simply built to allow just for real time short text message exchanges, Chat clients gradually integrated features from other applications, such as voice and video, as well as file-sharing which is now commonly offered in most platforms. These were made possible by the rapid increase of the Internet bandwidth offered to the average user, more efficient signal compression techniques and better hardware. The most common Chat clients (such as MS Live Messenger, Skype, Google Talk, Yahoo! Messenger AOL aim, and others) offer a large array of services, many of these integrating as well traditional fixed line and mobile telephony connectivity, making them a real desktop communication hub.

For the politician Chat applications can be an important tool to keep in touch with professional and personal contacts and discuss ad-hoc issues with a limited group of people. They are less suitable to group work, since it is difficult to manage a text based or voice discussion with more than 4 or 5 contributors. It is also unsuitable for a structured debate on difficult issues as these require more time to formulate and think of solutions than it is allowed in a real time interaction.

Text chat can be an interesting alternative to telephone conversations in the sense that a log of the discussion is kept, making it easier for both parties in the discussion to remember what was said and search through discussion logs for specific information.

The Chat application offered by Google through its web-based e-mail client is an interesting application in that sense, as it allows for seamlessly searching through e-mails and chats alike, pointing towards a possible merge of both applications in the not too distant future. With other standalone Chat software one has to look through application specific log files to retrieve information in discussions.

In the not too distant future it will be possible to search through Audio recordings of conversations made as well. Despite the fact that one would think that video chat would replace voice chat that in turn would have replaced text chat, this is not the case as each mode of communication serves different purposes and is suitable for different cases.

Skype offers a possibility that could prove of interest to politicians. The latest Skype software embeds the possibility to make skypecasts or live public discussions, which anyone using Skype can follow and - if allowed by the moderator of the discussion- participate to it as well. Some have integrated Chat tools on blogs as a way for citizens to communicate with politicians.

3.2.5. *Online Multimedia Content Sharing platforms (YouTube, Flickr etc)*

The online sharing of pictures and video has existed for several years, but it has recently transformed from a simple account-based online services to full fledged community platforms functioning around and through images, photos and videos shared among their members. Offered for free, these sharing platforms and communities have revolutionised the way and the speed at which multimedia content and information reaches across the globe. They have evolved to become content distribution giants used even by governments and International institutions to diffuse their content, finding in it a very simple to use, free and very interactive way to deliver. They empower simple but talented users (independently of where they come from, what they believe in and what connections they have) to become world class opinion leaders overnight, on a system that favours and promotes content on the basis of ratings provided by users themselves, rather than money or political power. Basically anyone with some skills and an access to a PC with Internet connection and a web cam or any video recording enabled device (mobile phone, photo or video camera) can potentially become a global broadcaster.

It is obvious that such platforms have many uses for politicians, as they can produce their own videos to share with all. That could even take the form of a daily news brief, messages to constituents and so on. Politicians can even post videos of real life events or municipal meetings adding to transparency and accountability of these processes. In turn citizens can comment or discuss the material posted, or even post their own. These online services integrate also quite well with Blogs, making the later even more complete Information and Communication platforms.

There is of course an issue with the online reputation systems in general, applying to online content rating (such as vide pictures texts etc), where the most highly rated or viewed content despite the fact

that it is in the "top 10 charts" it bears no guarantee of quality or accuracy as such. So here again politicians should choose their sources of information based more on the reputations of the authors or the recommendations by people they trust as being knowledgeable rather than number of hits or views achieved.

3.2.6. *Internet indexing, search portals, social bookmarking*

The Internet Indexing and search tools and portals have been at the centre of the success the Internet has known these past years. Going from few hundred pages at first to billions of interlinked web pages and pieces of online content (text, video audio pictures, mixed content etc) today, the search engine and thematic indexing of online content has played a crucial role to make the information online accessible to the users. There have been various search engines and techniques developed, various content indexing portals deployed over the years, with Google and Yahoo keeping the lead these past few years. These tools can deliver accurate or less accurate results depending on the way they are used. Mastering the internet search techniques can prove to be an important tool for politicians and citizens alike in their quest for valuable information and knowledge.

The search engine portals in particular (Google search, Yahoo search Microsoft Live search and others...) are also the Information gate keepers of the Internet, Beyond being used for information retrieval they can be used also to increase the visibility of a website, blog, forum, online community and so on. Being able to place your site on the first page of results of these search portals for a given keyword entered, has an enormous marketing value as it gives incredible visibility to it. As the searching techniques and content rating mechanisms used by the major search platforms change over the time, web sites need to adapt as well to keep their positioning on these.

In response to the increased power and quasi-monopoly the great search engines have over Information, new methods of content rating indexing and promotion have emerged in the form of social bookmarking and social content rating mechanisms. Based on real users estimate on the usefulness and accuracy of information these platforms provide an alternative to the large search engines. Some well known social bookmarking sites are <http://del.icio.us/>, <http://www.stumbleupon.com/>, <http://digg.com/>.

Social bookmarking is a tool that can be of interest for the politician beyond his quest to valuable information, allowing him to share with other politicians citizens etc, his own bookmarks, websites, blog posts etc, he believes are of interests, turning himself in a valuable information provider as well.

3.2.7. *Second Life and Virtual Worlds*

Second life is a web based 3-dimentional virtual world, where people are represented by their virtual 3D animated representation or avatars. They can interact with other users mainly through gestures and text chat and as well as audio in a few cases. The users can also interact with the virtual world composed of buildings imaginary landscapes etc, they can go shopping in virtual shops dance in virtual bars, participate in virtual meetings and gatherings and so on. Everyone is free to go where he pleases and interact with who he wants. Beyond just socialising, this virtual world has become a real business case with many big companies investing in the creation of virtual shops, and governments are opening up branches of administrative services (such as embassies), offering an alternative channel for communicating with citizens.

For politicians it could have some, but still limited benefits. It has been trialled extensively during the French Presidential elections, where candidates built their pre-election kiosks, nice looking avatars were distributing virtual leaflets, and even virtual meetings were set up with candidates themselves through their avatar discussing with other presumably French citizens in virtual conferences or meeting rooms. There was also the case of a virtual demonstration against the opening of the French extreme right wing party office in second life, where they sacked and vandalised the virtual kiosk. (...)

Beyond the avant-garde feeling of being in the cutting edge of virtual world politics, the relatively small user base of second life makes its usefulness as a political campaign and mobilisation tool relatively limited, if it is not for some articles that could appear in mainstream media.

This could of course change in the future if virtual worlds become widely used, and eventually more user-friendly, as the creation of events, buildings and the manipulation of the elements in the virtual world still require a high level of specialised computer programming skills.

3.2.8. *Online Forums*

Online Forums have been for long time the tool of choice for online discussion, exchange, debate, even community building. Major online communities usually dedicated to some issue or cause, are being run through online discussion forum platforms, many of which are freely available online. The same trend observed with blogs applies to some extent for forums as well gradually offering a vast array of additional functionalities beyond the standard creation of discussion topics and replies. We see often included as well, instant messaging tools, user profiles and statistics, content rating mechanisms, polls, uploading of content and so on.

Politicians can really benefit from online forums, opening up a structured discussion space with citizens, stakeholders and other parties. Going beyond the limitations of just commenting on uploaded information offered through blogs, it is possible to conduct discussions on multiple topics and sub-topics using online forums. There are nevertheless issues here as well. Like in blogs, it is not sufficient to set-up the tool and put online 3 discussion topics to have a discussion going. We have seen many times empty forums that failed to deliver.

An online forum discussion, just like a real live public discussion, needs good preparation and communication efforts before launching it, needs to address real, important issues, needs a small core of passionate people that will kick-off and maintain the discussion, needs good moderation and animation during the discussion, needs interesting guests and finally needs the promise of concrete outcomes and actions at the end of the discussion.

These discussion / debate platforms are important in the politician to citizen relationship as they can allow for citizen participation in discussions attaining to concrete policy options or proposals formulation. This in turn can have a very positive effect in re-engaging citizens in a meaningful relationship with politics, politicians and policy making, at the end benefiting the democratic functioning of our societies as a whole.

There are of course some limitations inherent to the tool itself, at least the way most online forums function today. In particular in cases where the discussion actually takes off and there are a great number of participants or contributions, things can get complicated. We find there is a real issue in being able to make something out of a discussion that spans on hundreds of posts, taking up dozens of pages with dozens of people replying to each other. One way to keep this from happening is to keep discussions in a tight timeframe (2-3 weeks) while allowing for good and well moderated discussion to take place. It is then important to ask the moderator to recapitulate the main points and arguments in the discussion in just a couple of pages, allowing for both participants and non-participants to understand where the discussion led, what the were the outcomes in short giving them the possibility to consult archived discussions as well if need be. This approach also allows decision makers to take concrete steps based on these outcomes.

3.2.9. *Polls*

Refers to the possibility of conducting small scale opinion polling, usually relating to just one or few questions, replied to by citizens through an easy multiple choice form. Many websites conduct already such small scale opinion polls, for a variety of issues.

It can be beneficial to politicians since they can easily embed such a small polls on the front page of their web site or blog, getting some hints on issues of interest to him while giving up-front the possibility for citizens to express themselves, be it in such an elementary way.

The issue that rises is of course the relevance and interpretation of the replies collected, as there is no clue on the demographics of those who answer. Nevertheless it can give useful hints and general impression of the way people feel about some issue.

3.2.10. *Online Surveys / Questionnaires*

These are more comprehensive and scientifically robust opinion polls done through questionnaires that aim (in our case) to collecting the needed data in support of policy making and formulation phases, policy implementation or ex-post evaluation. These are usually conducted by a specialised market research company offline, online or by phone using scientifically stratified population samples or random sampling.

It is possible for politicians to make use of online questionnaires proposing them to citizens through their website or blog. In order nevertheless to make up for the unbalanced and non representative self selected sample that will reply online, it is important to gather demographics of respondents. The creation and analysis of a questionnaire usually require specific skills, meaning that the politicians may have to hire specialists to make the most out of citizens input.

Questionnaires or surveys can become a key element in transforming the way a politician works and engages with citizens. It can be used to guide the policy formulation process (before decision and implementation) or to evaluate a policy or action. In both cases it introduces an important element of citizen participation in policy making.

3.2.11. *e-Petitions*

This is a relatively recent tool that emerged from the online transposition of a very old consultation system still used and legally binding in many countries, informally used in many more. ePetitions can be a very important tool for politicians and citizens alike the first learning about issues citizens want to raise and their relative importance, the second having a chance to point out to politicians issues that are not adequately (if at all) dealt with and need further attention and interventions from the policy maker.

It is an important tool as it allows for easily aggregating citizen support around specific issues through a relatively simple system, avoiding never ending duplications in unilateral communications and exchanges (like e-mails, fax or phone calls) over the same issues. In that sense it relieves also the politician from the burden to individually take care of all citizen solicitations often ending up in just ignoring them being unable to properly respond.

On the other hand if the tool and its objective is not properly explained it can lead to confusion and frustration, with citizens believing that assembling the right numbers can push anything down the throat of decision makers. It is usually used more as an indication of what issues need more attention and what is the general feeling about it.

Recently a very successful petition on the UK prime ministers page asking for the cancellation of a bill project, made it to the news headlines gathering over 2 million signatures in a matter of weeks. The danger is that if not properly managed such tools can give the false impression of a push button democracy tool where x amount of signatures mean a political decision is taken in the sense demanded by citizens.

The most important issue remains the institutional framework for ePetitions. In countries where off-line petitioning is accepted as a participatory tool with legal repercussions, ePetitioning is quite naturally becoming the successor of off-line petitioning, inheriting its institutional importance.

There is of course a need to commit policy makers to seriously deal with petitions gathering strong support even in countries where there is no institutional framework for petitioning, or they will have to face the consequences of the citizens' frustration having believed in their power to participate in policy formulation processes, offered through online petitions, and being later on let down.

There have been some online petitions systems deployed recently, some of which are free to copy (open source) but still require a fair amount of programming skills to be deployed online. There is also a need to moderate online ePetition systems as there might be abuse in what is expressed online or duplications with very similar petitions pertaining to same issues being requested many times. Evaluation: strong political potential, if properly focused.

3.2.12. *e-Vote*

By e-Vote we usually mean the transposition of the traditional voting and electoral processes, to electronic ICT based equivalents. We have several different types of e-Vote systems. Voting in polling stations on highly secured terminals or Voting Machines connected to a central system through a network where the aggregated tallying takes place. These systems have already been tested in large scale elections with acceptable results, given the investment needed. (USA, Brazil, India etc)

The added value of Machine or Kiosk based eVoting carried out in traditional polling stations is mainly the better accuracy of results (limiting hand counting and error prone human interventions) and the speed at which these are delivered. The use of networked electronic ballot boxes, can also allow the

introduction of other innovations to facilitate the voting process such as the possibility for citizens to vote in any polling station as the voter records are shared among all systems.

Nevertheless the investment to replace all the traditional ballot boxes with digital ones can be quite extensive, rising questions on the real added value obtained as the logistics of elections are kept very high and the citizen still has to queue in polling stations to vote. These concerns have also been backed with allegations of fraud in the tallying process and technical defects that questioned election results even in the USA, where extensive use of such voting machines was used.

Despite these concerns eVoting through secure electronic ballot boxes has proven to be a valuable tool in carrying out fair elections in countries such as Brazil and India, allowing for a much better tallying error ratio than ever before.

On the other hand we have Internet based or online voting systems. These have also been tested in large scale nation wide voting exercises as a complement to traditional voting systems, with encouraging results despite the relatively limited use of online versus the traditional system (Estonia, Switzerland and others). The added value of online voting systems is thought to be quite important as it should potentially allow every citizen to vote securely from any internet enabled terminal (PC, PDA, 3G Mobile phones, Public Internet Kiosks etc). There are of course a lot of issues to be solved in particular concerning privacy and security concerns, but important progress is made year after year.

Despite the issues and concerns raised, the use of Internet to carry out legally binding election, be it at local regional national or even international level, with the purpose to elect representatives or decide on issues in a wide range of institutions, ranging from local associations to governments or international organisations, has the potential to innovate and reengineer voting as a core element of our democratic governance processes. The potential of the generalised use of Internet in our societies in the future⁶, could allow for a general adoption of online voting, eliminating much of the cost and logistics incurred in electoral and voting processes today.

If used for legally binding elections (local national etc), these systems no matter what the technological or methodological path preferred, given the very high stakes, require great investment in time, resources and money.

Nevertheless, experiments have already successfully being carried out with small scale web-based e-Voting systems, trialled at a lower institutional level, for example in elections inside political parties, associations, academic and other institutions. These small scale web votes are well suited to carry out also non legally binding soft-voting or consultative votes of preference concerning issues among members of an organisation or institution.

Progress is generally very rapid on all web matters, but there is still a long way to go for the creation of a light easily deployable secure and reliable online voting system. The deployment of such eVoting systems, even for non legally binding votes requires of a fair amount of expertise and know-how as these are usually custom made platforms, and require that principles of democratic voting are respected⁷.

3.2.13. *Social networks, Online communities*

Social networks and online communities have grown these past few years to become multimillion membership based networks usually translating into multibillion dollar businesses.

MySpace and now Facebook or even more professional networks such as LinkedIn, have started to attract politicians and policy makers in their effort to raise support for their causes. It is often easier to open-up "shops" where people already hang out, rather than trying to create conditions for them to come to your online platform. This seem to be spreading as a philosophy with important politicians having already a page in Facebook, parties have created online interest groups and NGOs are fundraising for causes.

The truth is that the functionalities offered today on these online social network communities are somewhat limited to these of a basic blog with the possibility to upload photos video and basic discussion forum facility. So the main reason for politicians to reach out in online communities would

⁶ The increased drop in cost of internet access and devices to access it, the convergence of Internet enabled technologies (PC, TV, Mobile etc_) all concur to a rapid growth of the internet user base. Of course there will always be those unwilling or unable to be online, which nevertheless have the right to be part of all democratic processes of our societies. This means that offline equivalents of these processes should be kept in parallel where necessary.

⁷ See among others paper "Revisiting legal and regulatory requirements for secure e-voting"
http://www.instore.gr/evote/evote_end/htm/3public/doc3/public/evote_paper_SEC_2002_2.doc

not be in our view the tools offered, but rather the fact that it can reach very rapidly great numbers of people already present on the network. The fact of course that anyone can open a group or cause support network on Facebook, has created confusion with a great deal of multiple parallel groups opened dealing with same issues.

3.2.14. Groupware (Yahoo groups, Google Groups)

Offered for free by the same companies offering webmail and chat, these are small scale Content management platforms geared towards managing interaction and activity of users rather than managing information (blogs). They offer a relatively easy set-up and customisation interface, and a standard set of tools to run a group online, such as forums, calendar, uploading of files to be shared, user profiles, e-mail alerts and RSS feeds, polls, group mail, management of membership and access rights and so on.

Compared to Blog based platforms these group-ware platforms are less flexible and customisable offering basically a standard layout and tools for all with a possibility to maybe change colours and fonts. The two platforms each have their own specialities and comparative advantages but they seem to be converging to an all encompassing online content management system with online community management features.

These platforms are of course useful to politicians seeking to create an online community for discussing issues, sharing files and even sort-o-voting through mini-polls available in some cases (Yahoo Groups). Nevertheless if publishing ideas and sharing information is more essential than creating an online community, Blog-based platforms are best suited, as groupware are built around the logic of the older mailing-list concept, keeping it at the centre of its functionality.

3.2.15. Wiki platforms / Collaborative drafting

These platforms allow for the collaborative creation and sharing of knowledge, providing basically an online collaborative text editing platform. This has allowed for many variations and applications to emerge, most importantly the well known WikiPedia, a global online encyclopaedia drafted with contributions by millions of people across the world.

Other specialised versions have emerged like the travelwiki and the mediawiki.

This collaborative drafting and knowledge sharing platform can become useful to politicians wishing to involve citizens, NGOs other third parties or fellow politicians to the drafting of policy documents and positions. Even though it requires some skills to manipulate it and its interface is not really intuitive for the non IT savvy or not even user friendly to the same level blogs are today, they remain relatively overlooked despite their many merits.

3.2.16. Full featured open source CMS platforms (Plone, Drupal, Joomla)

These are quite different platforms from all the others examined so far, in the sense that they are fully fledged suites that allow for the relatively easy set-up and customisation of Content management enabled sites. Specific skills are of course required to deploy and customise these platforms, and they need a dedicated hosting space for them to run. (Whereas most of the other tools we analysed are offered for free including the hosting space, however limited it is).

These can integrate the functionalities of most of the tools and platforms examined so far in form of modules already developed and freely available online.

When customised, these can become extremely powerful platforms, but require technical development and design skills, as well as sound knowledge and communication management to be able to combine efficiently the different tools into an integrated seamless environment.

If the resources are available these can prove to be the best choice in particular for municipalities, parties, organisations etc, providing theme all the tools they need to promote their work share knowledge and information, deliberate and consult with citizens etc.

3.3. Matching needs, tools and outcomes

As we said above, all these online tools and systems we described above can be used in many different ways and can be combined in many ways to produce different results. We will try to categorise them on the basis of basic functions these are used for, and rate their efficiency or adequacy.

		The basic function categories can be roughly set as follows:			
Online tools:		find and access relevant Information	Publish, share information, ideas views and opinions	to discuss and debate issues	to record and tally positions and opinions
1.	E-mail	★★	★★	★	-
2.	Online Newsletter / RSS Feeds	★★★	★★★	-	-
3.	Blogs	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★
4.	Chat and VoIP clients	★	★	★★★	-
5.	Online Multimedia Content Sharing (YouTube, Flickr...)	★★	★★★	★★	-
6.	Internet indexing, search portals, social bookmarking	★★★★	★★★	★	-
7.	Second Life and Virtual Worlds	★	★	★★	-
8.	Online Forums	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★
9.	Polls	★	-	-	★★★
10.	Online Surveys / Questionnaires	★	-	-	★★★★
11.	e-Petitions	★	★★	-	★★★★
12.	e-Vote	-	-	-	★★★★
13.	Social networks, Online communities	★★★	★★★	★★	★
14.	Groupware (Yahoo groups, Google Groups)	★★	★★★	★★★	★★★
15.	Wiki platforms / Collaborative drafting	★★★★	★★★★	★	-

16.	Full featured open source CMS platforms (Plone, Drupal, Joomla etc integrating above tools)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
-----	---	------	------	------	------

The four basic functions described above (find Information, share Information views and opinions, to discuss and debate issues, to record and tally positions and opinions) are all essential for both policy makers and citizens and can be largely enhanced by using the right combination of Information and communication tools offered today. It is important thus to choose the right tools for the right functions and combine them in a way as to provide a complete toolset responding to these needs in a comprehensive way.

A first step in choosing tools is the evaluation table we provided above, allowing us to see that some tools are better suited than others to perform the different functions. Nevertheless this exercise is somewhat an approximation of reality since many of these tools, as we have stated above, are gradually blending in with each other. We assumed in most of the cases their added value in performing their typical tasks, to be able to differentiate them on the basis of functionalities served.

The Full featured CMS platforms (Drupal, Joomla, Plone, etc) are some how an exception in this exercise as they can Integrate most of the above tools. So why bother with each and every tool if we can have them all in a single platform? The answer is that these different tools are best suited for different needs and situations. In some cases for example a plain Blog will cover the needs of a politician wanting to share views on specific issues while allowing him to manage it himself, without having to deploy, maintain and manage a full featured platform.

As we said above each and every case is different and has to be dealt with as such, choosing the tools according to the objectives to be attained and the resources potentially available.

Resuming the Table above and the more detailed description of the tools done so far we can select the best tools for each function:

a) To find relevant Information:

Obviously the starting point of the vast majority of users today is the search engine. Searching for information through the whole of the Internet can prove to be tricky if one does not know how. There are nevertheless advanced search features in most search engines that remain under used. Other important places to find the right information are information and news portals where the quality of information is guaranteed by the editors, much like the traditional news industry. Also increasingly important are online communities of experts that can reply to your questions or point you to the right source of information upon request (forums) write about the issues of interest to the politician (blogs) and collaborative knowledge that is shared through Wikipedia, a wiki based interactive encyclopaedia, constantly enriched and kept up to date by contributions offered by millions of users across the world, often used and cited as a reference for authoritative and quality information on about anything.

b) To publish and share information and views:

Depending on the audience to be reached and the type of interaction required different tools can be used. Blogs are the simplest tool available, set up in matter of minutes and easy to use even for the non Internet savvy. The issue is of course that putting your thoughts online doesn't necessary mean that others will read them or even less comment on them. There is a certain amount of effort in making a blog successful and attract visits and reactions. The other way is to setup an online discussion forum. Discussion forums are relatively easy to set up as well but much harder to maintain as they are built around users interacting and discussing on specific issues. Gathering a critical mass of participants is often very hard and we have seen many "empty" forums calling for participation and discussion with little success. Nevertheless where important policy issues and decisions lie there is always room for lively discussion if the policy makers and stakeholders are involved and engaged from the start. There are already thousands of forums online discussing on about everything. Having spotted the right forum, created by the right people and gathering the right audience, the politician can start publishing his views there or react to existing views on the forum to get a better feel of how an online discussion works before deciding on launching his own.

Other tools to allow for a politician to publish his views are online newsletters he can send by e-mail (as long as the recipients have asked for the newsletter), online video sharing platforms (Youtube, Google video etc) where he can publish and advertise his own videos, participate and share views in

online communities and groups that are interesting and interested (e.g. Facebook⁸ groups on specific issues of interest etc). It is an exciting and very educative experience for both citizens and politicians (if all goes well) to be able to exchange views in a way never possible before:

c) To discuss and debate issues:

Better suited to discuss and debate issues are obviously online forums and groupware or community platforms, described above. Here again the issue is whether to start a new discussion space or integrate an existing one. It is better in any case to become familiar with the tools and attitude of online debate and exchanges before venturing in creating a space of your own. Sort of discussions can be carried out also through Blogs, where visitors can comment on the writers views expressed on the blog. We feel online discussion debate and deliberation platforms have not adequately evolved through time (forums look very much the same as they did ten years ago) and there is a great deal to be done in that area to respond to the actual challenges. There is a great need for efficient tools to manage and to understand discussions among a great number of people, as in traditional forums and other discussion spaces things tend to get out of hand after a few hundred messages and participants,

d) Record and tally positions

Online polls and surveys are the most common way of recording attitudes online, counting those for and against and their position on an issue. These have been carried out for many decades offline and very rapidly found their equivalent online, as they are important decision making tools for politicians or any decision maker. These are relatively easy to set up from a technical point of view. Polls are embedded in many groupware or community platforms as well as online discussion forums, and surveys can be produced and distributed online through very cheap yet professional services (such as www.surveymonkey.com). Nevertheless the requirement for expertise on methodology of social (or market) research required to create sound questionnaires and provide solid analysis and outcomes from the exercise to the decision makers, remains the same be it online or offline.

More recently new platforms and methodologies have been trialled offering online alternatives to voting and petitions, with a fair amount of success. Policy makers should look into these as complementary tools to increase citizen participation in decision making processes, along with more traditional ones.

Choosing which tools to use or where to start has to take in account the different requirements these pose in terms of time, resources as well as skills needed, to use, deploy and maintain them.

There is a golden balance to be struck between benefits and outcomes expected (e.g. reengage the citizen, better informed decision making and policy proposals and so on) the adequate tools to attain these outcomes (blog, forum, chat etc) , and the resources (time, staff, skills, money etc) available to deploy and sustain the system.

We believe that a modular and incremental approach is best suited to deploy this kind of tools and platforms, while keeping the big picture in sight. Investing in a super project that will deliver in two years is not the way to go given the very rapid and drastic changes in technology and concepts. It is best to focus on rapid deployment, and investing in skills rather than specific software packages,

The development and deployment of web tools for politicians and policy makers (be they local, national or international) can greatly benefit from alliances, cooperation and pooling of resources among them. The incremental additional cost in deploying a full featured platform for one politician or a platform to cover the needs of dozens of politicians of a same region or party is minimal.

Such alliances and synergies should be sought also as they could allow for the development and deployment of a common online platform to cover the Information and Communication needs of policy makers, being further developed instead of reinvented through time.

Beyond the importance and value of each individual tool and the functionality it provides, their combination can add up to much more. A comprehensive platform that will bring together in an

⁸ Facebook (www.facebook.com) is one of the largest online communities today, hosting dozens of millions of users and thousands of groups and networks. Recently even large organizations with very expensive and developed online tools and platforms deployed (NGOs, Parties International Institutions etc) are creating groups in Facebook finding it easier to rally support in online spaces where users flock for fun or to keep in touch with friends and colleagues (such as Facebook) rather than spend vast amounts on advertising to attract them on their own site. There are many politicians already on Facebook, discussing issues and gathering support (and funds) for their cause...

effective and efficient way all these tools can provide for the emergence of a transcending and innovative space for citizens and policymakers to meet discuss debate and collaborate to reach important decisions.

New information and communications technologies combine with the right methodology can provide solutions generally described as eDemocracy tools, to tackle many of the issues our modern democracies face, from citizen disengagement to lack of transparency and corruption and much more. Many NGOs and few governments are already working in that direction and politicians could greatly benefit from understanding and adopting such tools and practice.

4. From adapting politicians to adapted technologies - What is missing

The truth is that the above list of tools, without even pretending of being exhaustive, sets out the landscape for what must be a very confusing situation for most politicians wanting to venture in the online world. With a plethora of different tools available, many of which doing the same things in different ways, it is at best hard for politicians political structures and institutions to choose the way to go.

The reason for this situation is that politicians and institutions are trying to adapt to new information and communication technologies and thus try to squeeze their own needs into existing software solutions and platforms available that are often not adequate.

Even though one could consider using for example a blog to consult with fellow citizens and constituents on policy options, the tool itself not being adequate limits the potential of an important process. It should seriously be considered that adapted and user friendly tools are built to allow for the politician and citizen to better work together, for greater transparency and accountability in politics, citizen reengagement in decision making processes for better informed policies and at the end better democracy. Parties, Local or National governments and other political institutions should lead the way in this field, setting up collaborations with academic experts (political science, informatics, communication etc) and ICT / web developers to build and deploy such tools and platforms.

5. Integrating online with off-line – avoiding the “virtualisation” of local politics

While talking about the brave new online world and the fantastic new opportunities and possibilities opening up for policy makers and democracy enhancements, one should not forget that there are many people, citizens in their full right, who cannot or will not go online. Beyond the technophobes there are the disabled, the disadvantaged and the elderly who do not have access to the necessary infrastructures and lack the skills and the capacity to be part of this online world. The digital divide is a reality in even the most advanced of our societies and democracies, and in most of the cases it runs along the more traditional economic social educational gender and geographical divides. The people already on the wrong side of these divides are now also faced with a digital divide. As the digital world becomes central to a growing number of fundamental activities from communicating to learning, from banking or dealing with the local administration to just playing, the digital divide and its side-effects are becoming more and more important.

If we gradually move to a digital citizenship and web-enabled collaborative policy-making, bringing together citizens and policy makers, it becomes obvious that those affected by the digital divide will also be victims of a political divide, affecting their fundamental democratic rights. Keeping these dangers in mind is important when developing new online tools and processes that can affect or alter the functioning of our democracies or decision-making processes where citizens should have a say.

Despite the fact that one cannot just dismiss the new possibilities offered by new technologies just because parts of the population are not in-tune (however large these parts are), we should make sure that online tools do not fully replace but complement and enhance traditional democratic processes, while allowing all citizens (online or offline) to exercise their full democratic rights.

If we are to explore these possibilities and make the most of what technologies available offer today and in the future, we need to ensure that many pilot projects are carried out, experiences and development are shared, expertise across disciplines combined and accumulated and politicians familiarised with the new tools and possibilities.

Beyond experiments aimed at testing technologies and new processes, an increasing number of real projects have been carried out at the local level that aim in changing the way politics are produced and citizens are involved in the processes. While these are very important and carry great hopes in delivering more and better democracy in the future, it is important to keep these online processes well linked with offline equivalents allowing for the equal participation of all citizens, indifferently of their level of education, economic status and skills.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations – the way forward

Having explored the essential issues politicians and citizens alike are faced with by the rapid changes in the Information and communication technologies and culture, we examined most of the essential ICT and web tools available for the politician today, for finding and organising information, sharing his views and the information he deems important and discussing issues with citizens and fellow politicians, as well as tools to help assess public reaction for or against policy proposals.

We saw that all these tools reviewed served different functions, with nevertheless increasing overlaps and highly versatile all-in-one platforms emerging as technologies and internet access platforms and devices rapidly converge.

With the very rapid evolution of technologies and tools there is a certain amount of confusion on what the good choices are and the way to go.

We suggested that it was best for politicians to focus on smaller development projects that can deliver in a matter of few months and can easily be managed. Versatile blog platforms (such as Wordpress) offer probably today the easiest way to start, while providing an interesting array of tools.

Larger projects to provide full featured full fledged platforms for politicians could be best developed inside institutions or by pooling resources among politicians, in view to develop a common shared platform for all. Open source ready-made and easy to calibrate content management systems such as Drupal, Plone, Joomla and others, offer a relatively easy and reliable way to go. Nevertheless, as projects increase in size and complexity, the customisations that these ready-made platforms have to undergo, makes the choice of a content management platform that is developed from scratch an interesting alternative.

Beyond increasing their own visibility and give a modern appearance to politicians, these new technologies and combination of tools, can be effectively used to revolutionise the way policy making is carried out today, allowing for wider engagement of citizens and transparency in decision-making processes and providing for more and better local democracy.

Experimenting with new technologies to reengineer our democracy is beneficial and legitimate as long as we aim at delivering more and better democracy while remaining faithful to its founding principles.

Local authorities would also benefit from online guidance and advice services on eTools provided at a national level, such as the International Centre of Excellence for Local eDemocracy (ICELE) in the United Kingdom, which collects and provides detailed information and case studies of existing eTools and gives advice on how to select and implement them.

Finally, discussions about eDemocracy and politics in the Internet era, more than anything else, allow us to revisit and discuss once again the fundamentals of our democracies and institutions, to question their functioning, identify their flaws and to work on positive solutions.