

Internet Society of Australia

Submission to House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Procedure

Inquiry into community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives & its committees, including the use of electronic communication and improving community involvement.

ISOC-AU welcomes the consideration being given to enhancing community involvement in Parliamentary processes via electronic communication and potentially via the Internet.

However, to achieve the widest participation in these processes two issues need to be considered: the community's knowledge and interest in the processes, and its ability to participate. The Internet, unlike traditional communication channels of TV, Radio, telephones and the press, makes it possible for a large number of widely distributed individuals to participate in discussions and consultation processes.

The Internet has considerable untapped potential to increase community involvement in Parliamentary processes. The Internet Society of Australia recommends the following strategies to maximise this involvement:

- effectively disseminate information,
- make proceedings available online,
- extend the Electorate Office Video Trial to include public participation in proceedings,
- adopt open standards,
- simplify processes,
- establish suitable levels of security, privacy and confidentiality and
- become involved in a culture of open, frank and constructive communication.

About The Internet Society

The Internet Society of Australia ([ISOC-AU](#)) is a chapter of the Internet Society. Our aims are to ensure the open evolution of the global Internet and its related internetworking technologies. We are a non-profit, membership-driven organisation, and many of our members have been contributors to the creation and development of the Internet to date.

Putting proceedings on-line

Parliament has been equipped with sound and vision broadcasting at considerable public expense, but only a small fraction of proceedings are made available through the conventional media. ISOC-AU proposes that all Parliamentary proceedings, including all committee hearings, be made available live on-line in audio and (where available) video, via the Internet. Existing procedures would allow for closed sessions where required.

Extending the Electorate Office Video Trial

Internet technology provides the opportunity to expand the ability for citizens to participate in the political process and to increase MPs' contact with constituents. It is proposed that a trial be undertaken to equip 14 members (one Senator and one MP per state/territory) with secure video conferencing between their electorate and Parliamentary offices. When not in use by the member, the facilities would be required to be available for constituents to view Parliament and to appear before Parliamentary committees.

Consideration could be given to allowing members to take part in Parliamentary business from their electorate offices for the period of the trial. The member's image would be displayed on a monitor in the chamber or committee room and they would take part in debate. Some adaptation of current procedures would be required to allow for voting.

Need to Maintain Open Standards

In developing processes for disseminating and gathering information for parliamentary processes the utmost importance must be given to the adoption of open Internet standards such as HTML, RTF or even simple "text", in preference to proprietary formats. This has the significant advantages of increasing the ability to access to information and reducing the size of documents.

Also important are design considerations, to ensure that the use of graphics and the latest software features are limited to situations where these features enhance the explanation of the subject matter. Also, where necessary, alternative versions of the information should be provided, so not to disadvantage the visually impaired, who may be accessing the information through special devices.

These standards also need to be adhered to when distributing information via electronic mail.

AusInfo has published a useful set of standards covering many of the issues concerning formatting of electronic information. See: <http://www.ausinfo.gov.au/guidelines/>.

Simplified Processes

Community involvement can be significantly increased by disseminating information about processes and submissions via the Internet.

Involvement could be further enhanced by the timeliness and cost effectiveness of the Internet if its informality and inclusiveness can be incorporated into the policies and procedures for monitoring public opinion, discussion of issues and input into Government.

Security, Privacy & Confidentiality

In opening up Parliamentary processes, consideration also needs to be given to the risks to individuals of breaches of the confidentiality of their submissions, and any security and privacy issues associated with use of the Internet.

Culture of Open, Frank and Constructive Communication

An advantage of Internet communication is that it facilitates democratic, frank and open exchanges of views, which can provide broad-based constructive input into consultative procedures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

ISOC-AU supports the use of the Internet to increase community involvement in Parliamentary processes and recommends the following strategies to maximise this involvement:

- publish proceedings online,
- increase opportunities to participate in proceedings via videoconferencing,
- adopt open standards and enhance access capabilities,
- create more simplified processes,
- establish suitable levels of security, privacy and confidentiality, and
- take advantage of the facilitation of community discussion provided by the Internet.

signed:

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