

Configuring eParliaments from an Institutional Perspective.

The Italian Case

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Abstract:

This paper proposes an institutional analysis of the Italian Parliament aimed at exploring if and how its functions are changing as a consequence of the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies in the decisional process. Shifting from a micro perspective (how MPs use the Internet) to a macro perspective (what is the impact of new technologies on the Parliament considered as a collective body), this paper focuses on governance, communication processes and IT strategies both in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Italian Republic. In its exploratory stage, the analysis is aimed at outlining the basic terrain for further in-depth and focused research projects.

The Institutional Design

Sixty years after the constitution is approval - despite continuous calls for institutional reforms by political and academic domains - the Italian Parliament still features a perfectly symmetric structure in both Houses: the Chamber of Deputies (630 members) and the Senate of the Republic (315 members + 5 senators chosen by the President of the Republic + life senators) perform the same functions. As a parliamentary Republic, Italy's constitution assigns the Parliament a central role within the political system by awarding it the legislative, political control, and representative functions. The legislative function is actually carried on by both Houses, but the legislative action belongs to the executive that applies it according to the appropriate forms and procedures. Such non-exclusive acting in the legislative functioning and the tendential government control on the Parliament agenda are giving way to a sneaking confrontation between the two institutions. Over the last twenty years this conflict has increased due to a process of power verticalization and a transformational trend toward presidentialism as form of government (Calise 2007). Despite frequent questioning of the role, the decisional

ability or the representative capacity of the Parliament (Pasquino and Pellizzo 2006), both Houses have often performed a crucial function in the Italian political life «by compensating for the government's fragility, negotiating social conflicts, becoming major communication routes connecting civil society and political institutions» (Violante 2001, p. XXXII). The electoral system has been changed several times in the constitution itself, with a general preference for the proportional representation¹ until 1993 when a law-making referendum changed it to a majority system, thus establishing a new structure for the Italian political life. The transition from the First to the Second Republic took place while the political party system was in full crisis and the political class was partially being replaced due to wide corruption investigations. The 1993 law aimed at discouraging the creation of small parties and at fostering the shaping of well defined and stable coalition before the electoral vote. In 2005, due to political opportunistic reasons, the centre-right government modified such law just before a forthcoming election by moving back to a proportional system with locked electoral tickets, a percentage threshold, and a majority reward (21 December 2005, no. 270). The first election held under such system (9 April 2006) resulted in a flimsy victory of the centre-left coalition (Prodi II).

Within the Parliament structure, the parties maintained their own leadership through the Parliamentary Groups. Along the years, however, those parties adapted their strategies to the country's political and institutional changes by acknowledging the parliamentary group's key-role in organizing political representation, mediating various interests, and fostering a deeper personalization of political activities, thus reducing a parliamentary group to a mere organizational branch of the Parliament (Verzichelli 2003, Ciancio 2008). As for the relationship with the executive, we witness a growing strengthening of the government through legislative actions such as confidence votes, urgent decrees, and legislative proxy. Under the push of the bi-polar system, the Parliament becomes more and more a reservoir of political support for the cabinet in office (Battezzozze 2008) and less and less as an independent structure. The Parliament is lacking its mediation function, while the centrality theory (Pasquino 2007) is losing ground in favour of the decline theory (Mastropaolo and Verzichelli 2006, Fusaro 2008).

¹ Some attempts to promote the majority system were pursued in 1953 with the so-called *Legge Truffa* (during the De Gasperi cabinet), whose majority award aimed at reducing the uncertainty of coalition governments. One year later such reform was repealed. The Senate was still following the uninominal system on a regional basis (Act no. 29 of 6 February 1948), but the inability to reach the needed 65% in each jurisdiction led to seat assignment based on the proportional system. Instead since 1957 the Chamber of Deputies (Act no. 361 of 30 March 1957) had a direct voting in one single election, with seats assigned with the proportional system.

By detailing the introduction process of new technologies within the Italian Parliament, this paper will highlight those transformations that – instead of supporting the decline of the legislative power functioning – reveal a constant adaptive path of that institution in accordance with external instances (i.e., from European institutions, other national and International Parliaments, pressures from media and civil society) and internal timing as well (legislative staff strengthening and specialization, changes in priorities and relationship with the executive, multi-level representation). A situation that implies a steady tension between sovereignty action and power balance.

Our analysis has an explorative approach and covers the 1993-2009 period, when the transition to the Second Republic takes place. Our information gathering includes (but is not limited to) material from regulatory sources, internal research, reports on administrative and legislative conditions. We also held open interviews with the chiefs of information and online communication systems for both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate². Finally, we conducted a general analysis of the web sites of both Houses, MPs and Parliamentary Groups.

Transforming the Parliament in Three Stages

Since the 1980s the Italian Parliament underwent an IT-based transformation of its working and management procedures and data storage systems. The introduction of electronic voting (1988) already helped a strong acceleration of the legislative and decisional processes, providing more visibility to each MP and depth to the analysis of each voting session. However, the information system still showed several weaknesses: access to its many data-banks was limited to internal use only, partly due to a lack of gateway technologies at that time. In the mid 1990's the development of new Internet-based technologies convinced the Parliament to start acting as an institutional channel for the external public and also to learn how to finalize the high-tech implementation as a supporting tool for its organizational activities and law-making processes.

During the Second Republic, the new information and communication technologies played a pivotal role within the Italian Parliament. Their introduction took place in several steps according to different legislatures and political and institutional needs, but nevertheless along a steady and solid developmental line that will make the Italian Parliament one of the most

² There are significant interviews with Antonio Menè, Parliamentary advisor and Head of the Chamber of Deputies web site and technical innovation, to Marco Tagliavini, content manager for the Senate web site, to Mauro Fioroni, Head of Information Systems office, to Carlo Marchetti, Senate Informatics Services.

technologically advanced in Europe (Trechsel A.H., Kies R., Mendez F., Schmitter P.C. et al. 2003).

In the first stage, the parliament bureaucracy played a crucial role in the ICTs. It is fully involved in designing and also in constantly pursuing the improvement of working procedures about its legislative functions and strengthening control and aiming particularly toward increasing public awareness through specific communication programs. The inclusion of juridical counsellors and other staff members with technical expertise helped the Parliament to somehow redesign its priorities, thus contributing to reinforce the judging autonomy of MPs about the agenda issues, particularly on those proposed by the government, and to strengthen its control and protection of constitutional principles (Verzichelli 2004).

The second stage witnessed an external push of the parliamentary institution through the development of inter-institutional networking and parliamentary diplomacy. A sort of Parliament-Net emerged (Verzichelli 2004), able to confront a growing complexity in the legislative system and other challenges posed – as related to actual democracy and institutional performance – by the multi-level governance dynamics: «state, state and sub-state constituencies are now able to communicate among themselves and to create a *network of elective assemblies* moving toward a fuller citizenship, a plural citizenship...» (Manzella 2002, p. 45). In this new relationship system, the EU community acts at times as a major subject and at other times as an equal partner, asking its agent for support and participation, especially about the interoperability of information systems. The development of cognitive and pedagogical action becomes then functional to the affirmation of a different central role for the parliamentary institution within the political arena, enabling it to act as a systemic tool for linking, exchanging and circulating information in complex governance systems (Dickmann and Staiano 2008, Violante 2000).

The (just started) third stage relates to a more sophisticated use of ICTs by each Member of the Parliament. There is a particular emphasis on the political use of multimedia and some forms of interactivity. At the same time, the ICTs are being employed as a personalization tool by the very institution leadership, in an attempt to reaffirm the symbolic function of the Parliament itself and its central role within the political system.

The Constituent Role of ICTs

The first phase could be defined as a *constituent stage*. Initially the ICTs are employed mostly to abide by Article 72 of the Constitution regulating public display of Parliamentary activities, and by Acts no. 839/1984³ and 241/1990 extending such public display to current computer-based networks. Also, the ICTs are being used to speed up and automate the working procedures – for administrative purposes, legislative and decision-making activities, and access to regulations sources (Financial Act 2001, art. 107).

This stage evolves mostly during the XIII Legislature (from 09/05/1996 to 29/05/2001), with obvious follow-up in the following Legislatures. With Luciano Violante as Chamber of Deputies speaker and Nicola Mancino as Senate speaker, the XIII Legislature could be considered a key period for organizational, technological and legislative innovation - particularly for a general environment geared toward change. Several interviewees stated that Luciano Violante staff put genuine enthusiasm in that transformation process, aiming at both simplifying internal workings and opening up a communication channel with the civil society and other administrative sectors. It will mark a turning point in the history of the Second Republic by tracing the way for subsequent administrations. A number of conditions, however, have helped to make this period particularly receptive to any innovation project.

Marking the transition from the First Republic to the Second Republic, the 1993 electoral law change helped to provide strength and legitimacy to the government program, thus paving the way to those comprehensive reform projects that will fully transform the organizational structure of central and peripheral administrations. At that time the Italian Parliament was still lacking full credibility due to a recent series of bribing scandals (Tangentopoli). Several critics complained about a subsequent legislative overload and hyper-activism⁴ that, lacking technical support systems and impact measurement tools for such regulations, helped to create a climate of uncertainty about the rule of law (Zannotti 1997). After the abolition of confidential voting in the 1980's (which was the origin of a strong intra-party conflict), the standing orders of both Houses were further modified thus reinforcing the government position within the Parliament itself and providing a greater optimization of decisional matters (the 1988 standing orders reform provided a reduction of the time available for the submission of the amendments, a more

³ «Norms on the official collection of Normative Acts of the Italian Republic and on the Official Gazette of the Italian Republic».

⁴ For example, from the X to the XIII Legislature the quantity of bills introduced by the Parliament grew from 110 to 250 proposals per month (Giuliani e Capano 2001). During the XIII legislature the number of private member bills reaches almost 90% of the total amount of proposals presented.

stringent regime for their eligibility, a process known as *contingentamento dei tempi*, or the *rationing of time*).

Facing such executive strengthening, the parliamentary institution strived for a new balance: the 1997 standing orders reform of the Chamber of Deputies (art. 16-bis) gave way to an innovation process that will reinforce the decision-making action both in the government and the Parliament.

The Committee for the Legislation – a joint body linked to the Presidency of the Chamber of Deputies – is established to function as a *room for institutional reflection* (Palanza 2001) responsible for the quality of legal texts and for the purpose of simplification and reorganization of the legislation. The Committee - composed of ten members chosen by the President of the Chamber in equal numbers among the members of the majority and the opposition - expressed views on the quality of draft laws. Examine all the decree-laws and draft laws contain provisions for the legislative delegation. The Committee receives support by the Observatory on Legislation, a serving apparatus embedded in Studies and Documentation Service, which has the task of analyzing the legislation on the basis of a computerized collection of data and previous statistics and studies on legislation activities, at every level.

The internal study and documentation services for MPs offices⁵ are expanded and updated, new verification tools are implemented along the legislative route⁶, the position of a spokesperson is officially created and the Premier Question Time is introduced and broadcast live on the national TV⁷. Information about the overall Parliament activities is provided through several media channels in real time: satellite TV, RaiParlamento, RadioAula2, RadioRadicale⁸. More oversight instruments are now available.

⁵ The Study and Documentation Office for the Chamber of Deputies includes 15 Departments, each of them pursuing legislative research and providing policy consultancy with ad hoc studies.

⁶ The Act no. 50 of 1999 – also known as First Simplification Act – makes mandatory to produce technical, legislative, and impact analysis for each normative bill ready to be introduced. This Act impose also the reorganization of current norms and related computer-based documentation (NormeInRete).

⁷ Actually the Prime Minister will never use this option, leaving it instead in the hands of the Minister for relationship with the Parliament.

⁸ In 1955 the first live TV broadcast covered the election of the Italian Republic Giovanni Gronchi, and the same happened for the next President elections. The turning of the political life into a show started only in the 1980's, thus institutionalising the live TV broadcast (Meduni 2001). Introduced in 1983, the *question time* become indeed a symbol of the widespread media logic and produced big changes in the MPs political language, now using fewer technical terms and showing off their orator ability. The main effects of the turning of the political life into a show were the use of *sound bites*, words meant to impress and quick humour and jokes by politicians (Menduni 2001).

During this Legislature we witnessed a widespread digital conversion of paper material produced by the Parliament since 1948, with dissemination campaigns to inform about the electronic availability of such information. While the Bassanini Act provided a strong push toward procedure simplification and administrative process rationalisation (Act no. 59/1997), the parliamentary bureaucracy was crucial in enacting a seamless osmosis among public administration reform projects and organisational procedures in light of the upcoming technological innovation. The first Chambers of Deputies web site went live officially in 1999, while the Senate web site was online since 1997. The various data-banks were integrated to also include metadata and full-text archives of all parliamentary documents (Panizza 1993), while various organisational structure (reporting services, studies and documentation office, budget office) was reinforced and computerised to best support the decision-making process. Finally, it established an annual review and re-organisation (Law of Simplification) of the entire regulatory body material, still too fragmented and confused.

In 1999 the Ministry of Justice launched an inter-sector project called “Norme In Rete”, that is the online publication of all regulatory Acts produced by institutional actors, with open and free access to citizens. The purpose of the project was to provide a single access point to legislation published on institutional web sites from a single interface. In the following year, a technical Committee for general supervision was established, managed by the AIPA⁹ and included representatives from both Houses, the Ministry of Justice, the Prime Minister office, the Court of Cassation. Aimed at strengthening the indexing and standardisation process for regulatory material, in the 2001 Financial Act (Act 388 of 23 December 2000, art. 107¹⁰) the Government introduced a specific *Program for computerisation of current regulations* while later the Prime Minister’s office produced further *Rules and recommendations for technical formulation of legislative Acts* (Gazzetta Ufficiale no. 97 of 27 April 2001), followed by a Decree on 24 January 2003 with dispositions for computerisation of current regulations¹¹.

So far this automation process followed a slow path where each step did not appear to be linked to the overall workflow. It can be described as a case of *fragmented automation* (Lupo 2004). The 107 Program (from the article number that instituted it, in the above mentioned 2001 Financial Act) meant finally to provide continuity and certainty to regulation computerisation and upgrading, reduction of current law bodies, making it easier to locate and use information,

⁹ The Authority for ICTs in the Public Administration was established in 1993 with legislative decree no. 39.

¹⁰ Art. 107, on the use of ICTs in the current normative, introduced a specific monetary fund of about 12 billion euro for the period 2001-2005.

¹¹ As stated in the art. 107 of Act no.388 of 23 December 2000.

and expanding their knowledge within the public at large. Therefore, the 107 Program represented a strong political answer to the poor state of the Italian legislative body.

As reported by Enrico Seta¹² in the World e-Parliament Reports 2008, « (...) In the Italian legal system what is really difficult for citizens, as well as for the interpreter (the judge), is to recognize the final legislation resulting from the continuous, fragmentary and sometimes dispersed law-making process. This activity may involve the comparison of many acts and of explanatory notes, given that in the Italian legislation only very few consolidated codes are present. This is why the “107” project is extraordinarily ambitious and is taking up more time than expected. Two features of this project can be pointed out as best practices: the creation of data processing standards (...) and the involvement in the project of the Italian Parliament and parliamentary administrations (from both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies), together with government administration. This approach is proving to be highly positive: the architecture of the database (repository of current legislation) is seen as being closely linked to the legislative workflow (production of new legislation). Moreover, every future development of the legislative segments of the Parliamentary Information System will have to be carried out in compliance with the “107” standards and procedural rules» (IPU 2008, p.81).

Another important feature of this *Progetto NormeInRete* – later renamed *Progetto Normattiva* – is its use of XML mark-up language for online documents, thus providing great interoperability among administrations and institutions involved, consistency and formal uniformity in the database, ease and immediacy in accessing the entire normative content by citizens and interested parties. In this way the Parliament planned to increase the overall legislative quality and also to rationalise the drafting process by expanding access to all sorts of judicial sources: «We dare say that mark-up languages, and in particular XML, can provide interesting results at both ends of the legislative process: at the drafting stage, enforcing some or all the drafting rules defined for our norms; at the accessibility stage, fostering easy and sophisticated searching and rendering tools for the public at large. Furthermore, XML may constitute a great influence on several other aspects of the legislative process, providing support for the consolidation of laws, rationalising the legislative process, improving the referencing and connections among the norms, etc» (Marchetti et al. 2002).

In the Senate a first great innovation was the introduction of a new software (Eclipse) for the machine used by shorthand writers (Michela) to record each live session, enabling the immediate reporting and transposing in digital format on a computer. With the addition of a

¹² Research and Study Department, Chamber of Deputies of Italy.

parsing search engine, each reference in those reports became a hyperlink pointing to specialised data-banks, making it much easier to access cross-checking options and further resources. These features immediately increased the transparency of political action while decreasing research expenses.

It is important to underline the political commitment of both Houses institutional actors (the Presidency office, General Secretaries, Committee of Quaestors) that kept everything in place, authorised the necessary investments, managed the various services and helped the MPs to acquire the right human and technology resources to pursue or start their *constituency services*¹³.

Finally, the XIII Legislature was successful in launching a true revolution in the management of legislative production processes despite a climate of strong political instability¹⁴ (Violante 2001). Particularly, the role of technical-legislative staff and the parliamentary bureaucracy were essential in enabling the institution to provide political compensation (Violante 2001) and openness to service innovation. The parliament has shown, at this stage, strong institutional autonomy that is expressed in a more intense development of advanced services in support of legislation, in the reorganization of the information system and communication activities.

The *Connective* Function of the Parliament

The second phase could be defined as a *connective stage*. The ICTs are here employed in two directions: to reinforce the image and knowledge of the Parliament by citizens and to expand institutional and diplomatic collaborative activities, particularly with other EU country members. This stage covers the XIV and XV Legislatures, up to 30 May 2001, with Pier Ferdinando Casini as Chamber of Deputies speaker and Marcello Pera as the Senate speaker.

The XIV Legislature was characterized by parliamentary diplomacy activities strongly oriented to international relations and collaboration with other EU institutions, including analysis of European norms and development of comparative studies (Dickman 2008). Such step implied a new level of public dissemination and therefore the creation of a new section (Europe/Foreign Affairs) in the Chamber of Deputies web site to publish material related to

¹³ For example, hiring technical personnel in charge of outreach communication with the general public.

¹⁴ The XIII Legislature will cover four different centre-left governments (Prodi I, D'Alema, D'Alema II, Amato II).

joint administrative projects pursued with euro-mediterranean entities and the Inter Parliamentary Union activities. Such growing attention and push for foreign affairs produced also some technical and ICTs-related collaboration with EU countries and non-EU countries¹⁵.

In 2003 the Chamber of Deputies Foundation was launched, in order to inform about the historical and institutional role of the lower Chamber. The Foundation quickly became an important promotional and activity tool: some interviewees called it a “true explosion”, as the Foundation was also put in charge of organizing a variety of cultural events and publications. The same promotional trend brought to the public opening of *Punto Camera*, a structure situated near the Parliament Square in Rome, where people could access multimedia presentations to get any kind of information on parliamentary activities and material, and watch on large screens the Parliament’s daily sessions and the satellite TV channel managed by the Chamber of Deputies.

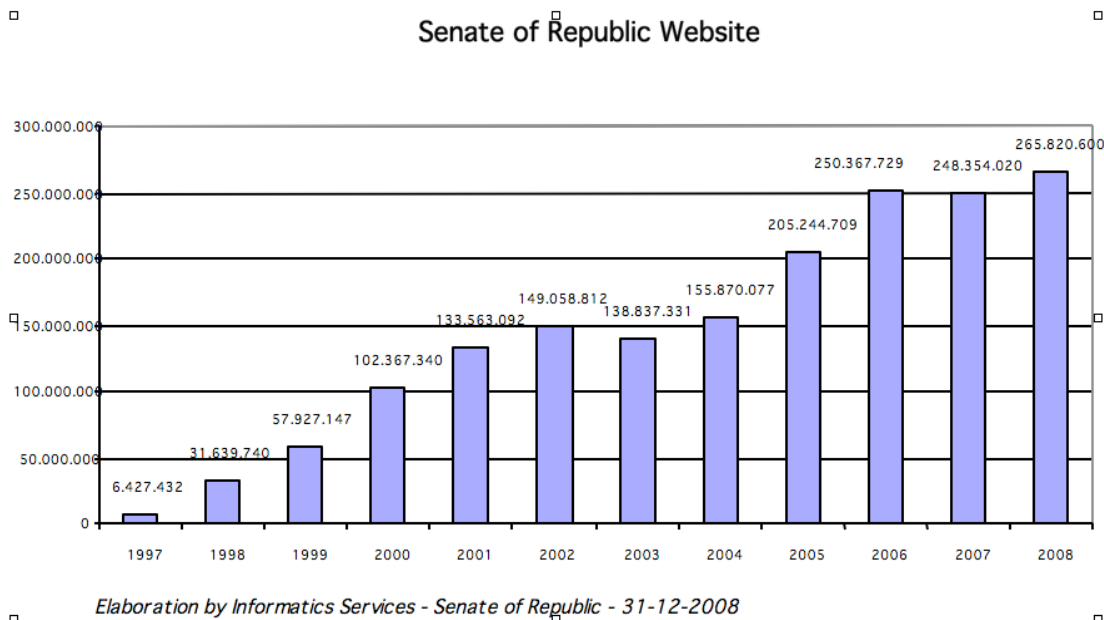
During the same Legislature, the Senate presidency was planning to publicly open its archives and to redesign its web site. In 2003 a new, free satellite TV channel started broadcasting the daily live sessions from the Senate floor.

In 2004 the new web portal was finally unveiled: based on input from a working group (also including experts from IBM), the new architecture focused on accessibility, usability and ease of use. A first review of its access statistics revealed that most users tailored their search to access specific session reports or bills under discussion¹⁶. As a result, the web portal started soon to offer customized services and news-oriented packages addressing a more popular audience. As a member of the staff pointed out: «It was immediately clear that short-hand reports, even just in a summary format, are a communication model too complex and time-consuming for average Net users. But above all, we had to solve the problem of providing institutional information to the general public, to citizens other than those used, for political or professional reasons, to scan through those short-hand reports» (Buccioli 2006). Such reports are then coupled with a sort of press release published directly on the Internet, more focused on providing a general context of the assembly discussion. With its references and hyperlinks, each press release becomes a starting point for a deeper navigation through other pages and

¹⁵ During the XIV and XV legislature, parliamentary delegations have participated in many international and inter-parliamentary network including: Eureka, Ipait, EPRI and many other european initiatives for technological cooperation and Information Society related issues.

¹⁶ Due to the explicit position of the political bodies, the Chamber of Deputies does not provide data on its web site access statistics because they are not considered relevant information. The same political bodies also relinquished any copyright on any content published online, reaffirming their public service function and the importance of disseminating Parliamentary material.

documents. This new communication strategy received a warm welcome by Net users and launched some kind of competition between the two Houses' web sites regarding their technical innovation (*fig.1*)



In 2005 a new intranet site was activated, aimed at providing a single and customisable entry-point for internal services (data-banks, email, document collections, search engines, etc.), and at increasing the overall collaboration by encouraging the creation of a “shared community” of users¹⁷. The Senate connective function is therefore aimed at reinforcing its own internal communication, with its intranet resembling a groupware technology with various networking options (chat, blog, wiki, noticeboard)¹⁸.

During the XV Legislature (from 28 April 2006 to 28 April 2008) the new Chamber of Deputies speaker Fausto Bertinotti continued to prioritise electronic documents and communication strategies, and to rationalise the procedural organization (electronic folders, digital session reports¹⁹) in order to cut expenses and increase public visibility. At the same time, the Chamber of Deputies created more opportunities for public events, such as a meeting on the *Role of Parliaments in developing the Information Society*, co-organized with the *Global Center for ICT in Parliament*, and further developed its educational function (with exhibitions,

¹⁷ Interview with Mauro Fioroni, manager of the Senate Information System (6 March 2009).

¹⁸ The design of the new intranet portal – which includes Identity Management technologies – also aimed at resolving some issues affecting quality and performance of the Senate activities, such as the critical lack of knowledge of the features available, the low use of services and databases, the need for assistance for basic operations.

¹⁹ Chamber of Deputies, *Report on the State of the Administration*, 2008.

conferences, publishing activities also aimed at schools, multimedia projects) in order to increase the institution knowledge in the general audience and improve its interaction with the civil society.

Finally, the networking function of the Parliament brought to the unification of the two Houses web sites in just one web portal – thus starting to integrate both information systems and data-banks. Such integration has been another indicator of the willingness to simplify the institutional communication toward the public and to rationalise the internal working procedures. In 2007 a sole library database was created, including both Houses' catalogues, along with the integration of the two Budget Service data-banks.

In the meantime Bertinotti was a catalyst for the third release of the Chamber of Deputies web site, particularly about graphical restyling and accessibility options, as established by a 2004 Act introduced by former Minister for Innovation and Technology, Lucio Stanca²⁰. The new web site did not feature invasive options such as invasive pop-up windows while providing many documents in XHTML mark-up language, thus the site was fully compliant with the W3C standards²¹. The overall strategy of the 107 Program received an open confirmation «in order to strengthen this project by means of new funding and better coordination with other related national projects in the field of consolidation and improvement of the quality of legislation (Art. 2, paragraph 584, of the act n. 244/2007). According to the new provisions, the “107 project” is extended even to legislation issued by the regional legislative assemblies» (Statement by Enrico Seta, IPU 2008).

Finally, the Senate also planned a restyling of its web pages mostly aiming at optimizing its navigational outline and searching options for those professionals that constituted about 90% of the overall users²².

²⁰ Legge Stanca, *Dispositions for providing access of disabled people to ICTs*.

²¹ As an external technology partner often involved in the Chamber of Deputies initiatives, the *Interact* company deals with design, management and broadcast of digital media. In particular, it provides services and products for multimedia communication and middleware application development.

²² During this legislation, access to the Senate website followed the political events of the government (Prodi), permanently in crisis because it does not have a clear majority in the Senate.

Mediating Parliament

The third stage could be defined as *media-oriented*, and it started with the XV Legislature to find full expression in the current XVI Legislature under Gianfranco Fini as Chamber of Deputies speaker and Renato Schifani as Senate speaker.

Here the multimedia dimension becomes the privileged tool to inform about the Parliament activities, with the press office playing a central role by launching technologically advanced initiatives and developing new communication products. Current event and publication sections receive more visibility on the web site, while the International news flow from foreign media gets also a prominent position. Large interactive monitors and touch screens are placed in the Parliament major offices, corridors, committee rooms, thus enabling MPs to be continuously updated on the daily agenda and discussions but mostly on news-oriented products. Along with video production and distribution,²³ more plenary and committee sessions are broadcast live and the satellite TV channel programming is also increased.

Moreover, the current Legislature appears to fully understand the importance of interactive tools for a more direct connection with citizens and the various *constituencies*. That's the reasoning behind the 1st December 2008 videochat hosted by Gianfranco Fini: the first time ever for a Chamber of Deputies speaker – quickly followed by a more interlocutory second time on 17 February 2009²⁴. Also on 2nd March 2009 a channel entirely devoted to the Chamber of Deputies was activated on YouTube (www.youtube.com/cameradeideputati), currently including about 40 video-interviews and some historical clips. Providing visibility to institutions and politicians through a media-oriented strategy instead of pushing archival or searching resources, the YouTube channel reinforces the current, innovative choice toward a 'more communication and less information' approach with complete autonomy and immediacy of access.

However, the Chamber of Deputies web site is still providing Really Simple

²³ The video program *La Camera in diretta* has been active since the Assembly session of 30 May 2001.

²⁴ The videochat was announced by a press release published on www.camera.it and distributed to the media. Users emailed their questions in advance and some selected questions were posed live to the President. Later all Q & A were indexed and published on the President web page for future references. Under many aspects, the event was a perfect example of the personalization of today's politics, as confirmed by the data monitoring and dissemination provided by the Interact company in a typical "Internet marketing" fashion. In fact, the lack of complete transparency (about, for example, the number of messages submitted, their nature, and selection process) configures the videochat as a political communications tool to enhance the personal image of the President Fini. It should be noted also that this is a particularly delicate stage for the Italian Parliament continually bypassed by the government. In several occasions, Fini had to defend the political autonomy of the Parliament.

Syndication (RSS) Feeds subscriptions to provide users – even on their mobile devices – with real time news about the Assembly daily agenda, Committee meetings, latest bills under discussion, press clippings, etc.

Also to be noted is the somewhat ‘ethical’ use of ITCs in keeping track of each MP presence in the Assembly or Committees and their voting records (based on digital fingerprint technology), in order to provide more transparency to the public. Since 3 March 2009 this data has been automatically recorded and then published on the Chamber of Deputies web site. The initiative aims at curtailing the habitual absenteeism and to prevent the so-called ‘Piano players’ trend (where MPs on the floor vote also for their absentee colleagues). However, such media exposure of politician records is stirring quite a controversy and uncovers a somewhat propagandist flavor.

Building on the experience of the previous *NormeInRete* program launched in 1999, is the newly created Ministry for Simplification in charge of promoting, applying and coordinating the digital indexing and classification of the current normative body²⁵. This new data-bank should be unveiled in June 2009 under the *Normattiva.it* program, where the same Ministry for Simplification also proposed to automatically repeal about 29,000 primary norms approved during the monarchic Regno d’Italia (1861-1946) e all the primary norms approved until January 1970 as selected.

In the Senate the novelty is its web site version designed for mobile and WAP-protocol enabled devices, thus improving its own performance²⁶. The recent introduction of wireless technologies in the Assembly – as explained by Stefano Ceccanti²⁷, Senator and constitution scholar – provides an immediate fact-checking option during voting sessions, further enabling a real time verification and dissemination of related information.

²⁵ Assembly short-hand report, Session no.120 of Monday 26 January 2009.

A conventional - and comprehensive - classification system of the different areas of legislation is based on TESEO (Tesoro Senate for the Organization of parliamentary papers) wich is structured in 43 thematic areas.

²⁶ Some date - provided by one of the interviewed persons (Marchetti, Senate of Republic, Informatics Services) - can help to have a general idea of the webtraffic generated. During the single month of December 2008 the Parliament web site is visited 589.920 times, with 1.655.073 pages viewed, and 4.114.026 total hits. As testified by Marchetti, those statistics are 1/7 of the annual total amount. In the same month, the Senate website is visited 356.409 times, with 10.039.278 page viewed, and 18.614.142 total hits. The webpages of Parliamentary Group in the Senate (which only provide the PG organic composition) are visited 7000 times in a month, while the most viewed pages are gathered by the Committees (Committees reports: 115.000 visits; Amendments pages: 37.000, Committees composition: 55.000, Committees Agenda: 34,000). About the email traffic, the Senate of Republic receives over 13 millions emails monthly, but only 800.000 messages are really delivered (one of the main problem still is the spamming).

²⁷ Stefano Ceccanti, interviewed on 2 March 2009.

On the political front, the institution provides each Member of the Parliament with an email address and a public page including a personal profile and his/her activity records – while over 36% Deputies and about 20% Senators have their own web site, with some managing their own YouTube channel and more than a few (younger) MPs even venture into the social networking world (blogs, Facebook, etc.). However, these examples do not reflect a full integration of online communication in the regular political practice, with most politicians still pursuing their presence in traditional media outlets such as radio and TV programs. Above all, each MP seems to promote his/her own individuality: in some instances, their blogs do not even mention their Party affiliation focusing instead on their professional occupation and experiences (see, for example, the Gabriella Carlucci's Blog).

None of the six Parliamentary Groups in the Chamber of Deputies has its own web site, while only one (the *Partito Democratico*) out of six Groups in the Senate has a web site²⁸. As a result, each MP tends again to build single-member constituency and to employ a responsiveness strategy mostly at a personal level.

Conclusions

In a little more than a decade, the Italian Parliament has taken big steps in four directions: *administrative re-organization* (strengthening service procedures, electronic protocol introduction, data-banks integration, digital document transmission, and digital signature validity²⁹), *legislative re-arrangement* (digitalization of Parliamentary Acts and bills, technology support for law drafting), *Parliamentary activities computerization* (committees digital reporting, electronic submission of bill amendments, electronic voting, call-up through email and SMS text messages, groupware and identity management, wireless network), *external communication implementation* (institutional channels, cultural and educational initiatives, video streaming, personal MP websites). Other important steps in facilitating the staff and MPs daily job and in making more effective the overall activities were an improved coordination network between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate and among the various secretarial

²⁸ On the contrary, in Portugal, for example, the Parliamentary Groups are in charge of organizing the web communication of each MPs (Leston-Bandeira 2007).

²⁹ Today the electronic protocol is fully operative – in accordance with the related normative approved in 2000 – and is configured as a complex system with one central protocol and 37 decentralized protocols. The online publication of the Assembly reports is outsourced to the Stabilimenti Tipografici Carlo Colombo Spa, that since 1988 were using computer-assisted optical readers and related technologies. They now provide XML mark-up language aid and other digital services supporting the Parliamentary activities (<http://stabilimenti.stcc.it/>).

offices, the library unification in one place with a single catalogue, and the collaboration among support, study and documentation services.

Despite the explorative approach of this paper, our analysis can provide an initial set of observations.

As an *engine of change*, Internet can truly affect the political process acting simultaneously inside the institutional, legislative and political arena. When correctly applied to institutional and legislative workings, the ICTs are a powerful tool for control and evaluation of issues at stake but, more importantly, of the executive conduct. Confronting the new government decisionism and the power asymmetric structure – at least in regard to legislative initiatives – the Parliamentary institution employs new strategies to compensate and rebalance the institutional context, by strengthening each activity related to legislative and political control functions and increasing the cooperation between the two Houses. On the other hand, the institutional communication and proceedings publicity are used to reinforce the representative circuit (citizens/pressure groups, parties, Parliament), to warrant the exercise of sovereignty, and to strengthen the corporate culture of elected people enhancing the expressive function of the institution (Capano and Giuliani 2003). The Parliamentary institution also aims at developing functions that reach beyond the representative role, trying instead to position the same Parliament at the centre of complex governance dynamics involving Italian and European regions, EU institutions, citizens (Parliament-Net). In such a picture, the Parliament is placed at both the beginning and the end of the representation chain (Leston-Bandeira 2007) «it is there (also) to maintain within a sphere perceived and perceivable as democratic the constant flow of governance shift – that is, the steadfast redesign of the idea and practice of sovereignty» (Mastropaolo and Verzichelli 2006, p. viii). Finally, the Italian Parliament is showing a reactive ability in managing a growingly complex legislative matter. Despite the threat of the government decision-making practice³⁰, today the legislative function seems even better organized and, more importantly, supported by a technical staff at each stage.

Inside the political arena, it is not clear yet, however, if such computer-based organization, along with the simplification and downsizing processes, will have a significant impact on the law-making decision process. Such impact should prevent, for example, those behaviours aimed at slowing down the institutional performance, including the habit of

³⁰ During the XV Legislature (centre-left government) 88,39 per cent of bills passed have been proposed by the same government. In the XVI Legislature, the Assembly approved 64 bills, and only 33 have been introduced by the government, with just one bill proposed by the Parliament, while the remaining 33 bills were about law-decree to be converted (according to the Observatory on the Legislation 2008).

presenting a bill just to show off a MP personal activism to his/her own constituencies (virtual representation, laws-manifesto) or proposing many amendments as a filibustering tactic. In this regard, parliamentarians seem fully aware that their bill proposals will have no effect, and in many cases will be not even discussed. Precisely for this reason, they consider that presenting laws is a good communication strategy to enhance the perception of their activities and achieve a "position statement". The current trend however is to use ICTs as an additional tool for personalization of politics, while the participatory side of ICTs is not fully embedded in the current democratic environment.

Although the new technologies are helping the disintermediation of political practice, it is still unclear how and on which issues the public opinion should be directly involved. Due to the adversarial nature of the political clash (Lippolis, Pitruzzella 2007), in Italy there is a strong fear that a larger involvement of voters in the deliberative process could result in a series of unexpected opinions, with tearing results for political minorities.

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