

# Congressional Web Sites and Their Potential for Public Dialogue

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The Internet has emerged as one way that organizations can engage their publics in dialogue. The purpose of this article is to explore Congressional Web sites as spaces for government–constituent dialogue. An analysis of Congressional Web sites ( $N = 100$ ) and interviews with Congressional offices ( $N = 32$ ) shows that Congressional representatives recognize the value of the Internet and the World Wide Web for communicating with constituents. However, Congressional Web sites do not appear to be facilitating dialogue between elected officials and their constituents. Interviews with legislative aides responsible for the creation and maintenance of Congressional Web sites suggest that elected officials are using their Web sites primarily as information dissemination tools. The implications for organizational communication scholars, citizens, and government officials as they consider the dialogic capacity of a mediated governmental environment are discussed.

The Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) are often heralded as strategic communication tools. The WWW allows any type or size of organization to have an easily accessible presence in cyberspace. Small organizations and large organizations alike can create Web sites to present their organization's mission, products, or services to the world. The Internet also allows individuals and publics to more easily communicate with organizations via e-mail.

The Internet and WWW also serve as mediators of organization–public dialogue. In the political sphere, the WWW may eventually emerge as a tool for reinvigorating the democratic process (Congress Online, 2002; Cyberspace Policy Research Group, 2000; Johnson, Hays, & Hays, 1998; West, 2001). This research tells us that some governmental sites better serve the public than others. However, there is a content and quality divide “that needs to be corrected before the Internet can become a forum for effective public participation in politics” (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2003, *passim*). More evidence is needed in the ways in which political leaders and organizations are using the Internet and WWW to improve the democratic process. This article attempts to add to the current research about the different ways in which Congressional representatives are using the Internet and WWW in the democratic process.

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Congress adopted the Internet for internal and external communication. Casey (1996) noted that many Congressional offices were irritated with the Internet and saw its adoption as one more time-consuming task for their already overworked staff members. Indeed, in the early years of the technology diffusion, Congressional members wanted to be able to limit access to their offices and control e-mail contact. However, today, “digital democracy offers the potential of more efficient public sector service delivery that enhances citizen accountability and governmental responsiveness” (West, 2001, ¶ 1). All legislative offices in the 108th Congress have Web sites. And today, electronic mail is an accessible tool that citizens can use to communicate their needs to elected officials. The Internet and the WWW can theoretically improve relationships between elected officials and their constituents. However, the evidence of the Internet improving government–constituent relationships is mixed. Instead of elected officials valuing e-mail messages from constituents, Greenberg (2001) reported how many Congressional offices are using new software to automatically respond to heavy volumes of e-mail messages (some dealing with hundreds of messages a day). Automated software packages such as EchoMail are being used to minimize the time that it takes for Congressional aides to respond to e-mail messages. Katz and Rice found that “having online access to government representatives does not necessarily mean interaction or deliberation” (2002, p. 106). Rather, “real online dialogue among different interest groups is rare, and government access is typically one-way” (Katz & Rice, 2002, p. 132).

Stowers (1999) conducted a comprehensive study of state and local governments’ use of the WWW for constituent relations and found that many government organizations “are using technology to present information in the old ways” (p. 124). That is, government Web sites are often used for one-way communication to constituents. However, Stowers also noted the enormous potential of the Internet for government–public communication as more and more elected officials “are also moving to develop new ways of presenting information and to provide services for citizens” (p. 124). Ferber et al. (2003) examined all 50 state legislative sites and found that a “digital divide” exists among the states in terms of content, usability, interactivity, transparency, and audience.

Thus, the ways in which political leaders and organizations are using the Internet and WWW to improve the democratic process needs further exploration. Although some researchers suggest that Congressional Web sites are becoming more interactive (Congress Online, 2002), West noted, "there remain problems" (2001, ¶ 3). This article explores the government–constituent relationship fostered through Congressional Web sites and seeks evidence of the dialogic capacity of government Web sites. We seek to understand, if, and how, Congressional offices are using their Web sites to communicate with constituents. To accomplish this task, the article reviews the theory of dialogue and its role in mediated contexts and outlines the methodology of a two-part study that included the following: (a) interviews with 32 Congressional offices representing Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, and inquiring about their office's Web sites; and (b) an analysis of the dialogic capacity of 100 randomly-selected Congressional Web sites. The final section of the article discusses the implications for organizational communication scholars, citizens, and government officials as they consider the dialogic capacity of a mediated governmental environment.

## THE CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE

### Theoretical Foundations

Dialogue as a theoretical concept has its roots in disciplines ranging from rhetoric, philosophy, and psychology, to relational communication. Dialogue has been considered as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood and rhetoricians, philosophers, and communication theorists have embraced dialogue as one of the most ethical forms of communication (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Buber, 1923/1970; Johannesen, 1990; Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Stewart, 1978).

Dialogic theory has also been extended into organizational communication and public relations theory. Indeed, recent thought on dialogue has sought to move it from an abstract concept to a more applied body of communication principles. For example, Kent and Taylor (2002) explored how dialogue has everyday applications for organizations as they communicate with publics. Organizations must be responsive to various types of environmental stimuli: laws, public opinion, and current events (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Thus, stakeholders, as one source of environmental input, have the ability to influence organizations. To meet stakeholder needs, organizations must seek out, communicate with, consider, and respond to stakeholders. Organizational responsiveness requires regular information exchanges with publics. The Internet facilitates this exchange and it can create the foundation for dialogue.

For organizations, dialogue sometimes is understood as communicating about issues with publics. At other times, dialogue is equated with "debate," or what Heath called rhetorical dialogue (2000). In the same vein, Pearce and Pearce have

explored how organizations such as public schools and community groups can engage citizens in dialogue (2001). Kent and Taylor examined the concept of dialogue for organizations and offered several recommendations for how organizations could engage their publics in ethical, mutually beneficial relationships (2002). Kent and Taylor suggested that organizations should focus on building dialogic interpersonal relationships among employees and external publics (2002). Organizations should also enact dialogic systems and procedures within the organization to give members guidance on how to be more dialogic in their communication with publics and each other. Finally, Kent and Taylor suggested that organizations should design Web sites that foster mediated dialogic relationships with external publics (1998, 2002). Dialogue in mediated contexts also offers opportunities and challenges for communication practitioners and scholars.

To extend beyond the current literature, one of the major problems in understanding the relationship-building capacity of Web sites is explaining how relationships can be created, changed, and maintained through mediated communication. Kent and Taylor (1998) identified five principles of mediated dialogue that organizational Web sites need to embrace to create dialogue with visitors. Sites must be easy to use, provide useful information to a variety of visitors, keep visitors on the site, provide reasons for return visits, and offer dialogic (feedback) loops.

These five principles of dialogue were based on interpersonal relationship building including the realization that (a) relationships are based on interest or attraction, (b) relationships are based on interaction, (c) relationships are based on trust yet involve some risk, (d) relationships require periodic maintenance, (e) and relationships involve cycles of rewarding and unsatisfactory interaction (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Mediated dialogue, like interpersonal dialogue

first involves attraction whereby individuals or groups desire to interact (“usefulness of information”); for relationships to develop interactions must occur (“ease of interface”); for relationships to grow dialogue must occur (“conservation of visitors”); and for relationships to thrive, maintenance and satisfactory interactions must occur (“generation of return visits” and “dialogic loops”). (Taylor et al., p. 268)

Organizations can foster mediated dialogue with publics by strategically designing their Web sites to include relationship-building features. These dialogic features as well as additional features have been studied in corporate settings. Esrock and Leichty (1998, 1999, 2000) extended Kent and Taylor’s (1998) work and found that corporations use their Web sites to showcase corporate social responsibility. Organizations also attempt to create dialogue with media publics. Rennie and Mackey (2002) found that pharmaceutical companies have incorporated a variety of dialogic features into their sites. And, Smith (2002) extended the discussion of dialogue into the public museum sector. Smith found that many museums wanted to be dialogic and engage their publics but did not have the resources to do so.

Much more information about the dialogic capacity of organizational Web sites is needed to extend beyond this current body of research. To truly create dialogue, organizations must solicit, analyze, and respond to constituent feedback. Organizations must also devote resources, both financial and human, to adequately interpret their publics' needs. And, perhaps more importantly, organizations need to create a space where their publics can meet, interact, and engage the organization. Organizations, especially those that are what Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) identified as resource dependent on their publics for support and resources, have an imperative to engage in this type of dialogic communication (see also, Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003).

Yet, it is important that dialogue not be merely symbolic communication. Symbolic representation occurs when organizations, institutions, or individuals, create public messages about activities to garner public interest or support. As Hinckley explained, symbolic representation refers to "the highly stylized substitute for the thing it seeks to represent" (1994, p. 175). According to Hinckley, "successful symbolic communication typically evokes what people already agree to or what they would like to think of as true" (1994, p. 175). Hinckley went on to suggest that symbolic communication allows individuals not to have to ask disturbing questions about their democratic leaders or their policies. By creating symbolic dialogue, politicians create identification between themselves and their "Webbed" public (cf. Burke, 1969, pp. 20f., 55f.). Are political leaders using their Web sites merely as tools of symbolic representation or are they using them to engage their constituents?

The next section of this article explores government–constituent relationship building in mediated contexts by examining Congressional use of the Internet and WWW.

### **Web Sites as Spaces for Government–Public Relationships**

Two research questions guide this study and are used to discover how elected officials are using their Web sites to foster dialogue with publics. The first question sought baseline data to understand how Congressional Web sites foster relationship building.

RQ1. In what ways do Congressional representatives use their Web sites for constituent relationship building?

The second research question inquired if, and how, Congressional Web sites are serving as spaces for dialogue.

RQ2. How does the design of Congressional Web sites foster dialogic communication with constituents?

The multimethod approach to answer these questions is outlined following.

## METHOD

This study employed a two-part design. First, interviews were conducted with Congressional aides in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. The second part of the study examined Congressional Web sites using the dialogic relationship variables outlined by Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003).

### Part I: Interviews With Congressional Offices

In the 108th Congress, including both the House of Representatives and the Senate, there are 53 elected representatives from the states of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. Seven representatives have been elected from Connecticut, 15 seats represent the citizens of New Jersey, and 31 seats represent the citizens of New York. This tri-state population serves as a purposive sample (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) that can be used to gain insight into the intentions and uses of Congressional Web sites. Congress Online (2002) noted that Pennsylvanian representatives had excellent Web sites—their delegation scored in the top 20. Congressional representatives from New Jersey and New York were not award-winning sites.

The researchers conducted telephone interviews with these Congressional representatives during spring 2002. The sample included representatives from both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. One trained interviewer contacted the Congressional offices in this tri-state area. The interviewer asked to speak with the person in the office responsible for the elected official's Web site. If there was no individual responsible for the Web site, or if that individual was not willing to be interviewed, then the interviewer asked to speak with the office manager. A total of 32 Congressional representatives' offices agreed to participate. One interviewee agreed to answer only the open-ended questions. The study is based on 32 respondents out of a population of 53 tri-state Congressional offices (60% of elected representatives in the three-state area).

**Highly scheduled questions.** To ascertain Congressional Web site potential, the actual uses of Web sites and the preferred channels that legislators want to receive constituent communication, respondents were asked a series of highly scheduled (or closed) questions. Highly scheduled questions force respondents to select their answers from a provided list (Stewart & Cash, 2000). Likert-type scales, semantic differential measures, and yes–no responses are considered highly scheduled questions. The interview format included three sets of highly scheduled questions. The highly scheduled questions in this study asked legislators to respond to multipart questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (with 5 meaning *strongly agree*

and 1 meaning *strongly disagree*) to learn more about how the legislator viewed their Web sites. Means and standard deviations were calculated.

***Moderately scheduled questions.*** Moderately scheduled questions (open-ended) provide respondents with general topics for discussion and allow them flexibility in answering (Stewart & Cash, 2000). To ascertain the details of whether the Congressional office was maximizing dialogic opportunities, 10 moderately scheduled interview questions, listed in the Appendix, were used to determine usage, audience, and goals of the legislators' Web sites. Questions asked about specific groups or organizations that the Congresspersons' Web sites target, the goal(s) of Web sites, the approximate number of e-mail messages received on a weekly or monthly basis, and the legislators' preferred means of constituent contact (telephone, fax, e-mail, personal visit, etc.).

## **Part II: Evaluation of Congressional Web Sites**

The second part of the study examined the dialogic potential of Congressional Web sites using the scale developed by Taylor et al. (2001). The researchers modified the mediated dialogue instrument. A list of all the Congressional Web sites was generated and a trained coder randomly visited 100 sites. The sample examined Web sites of the U.S. House of Representatives and members of the U.S. Senate. Eighteen (18) Senate Web sites and 72 House member Web sites comprise the sample. These ratios constitute approximately 16% of the House and 18% of the Senate Web sites.

Before the Congressional Web sites were examined, a pilot study and content analysis was conducted to determine whether there were idiosyncratic features of Congressional Web sites that should be evaluated in the "usefulness of information" category. In the pilot study, the coder randomly visited 12 Congressional Web sites. Through this analysis, the coder identified several additional features that were not described in the Taylor et al. (2001) or the Kent et al. (2003) studies. Congressional Web sites were found to have features such as "bilingual" sites, "tourist information" sections, and "kids' sections." These categories appear on other types of organizational Web sites (e.g., libraries, state and local governments, etc.) and were added to the study.

After the pilot study, the coder randomly selected 100 Congressional Web sites and evaluated each site on a 5-part, 31-item, dialogic scale first introduced by Kent and Taylor (1998), and later refined by Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003). The dialogic scale was slightly modified to capture unique features of Congressional Web sites. To see how well the sites served constituent needs, questions were added inquiring about multilingual text, the representative's committee assignments, voting positions on issues and pending legislation, information tailored to school-age children, and tourist information about the representative's home state. These additional five measures created a 36-item mediated dialogue scale.

## RESULTS

RQ1 inquired as to the following: "In what ways do Congressional representatives use their Web sites for constituent relationship building?" Six areas address this research question: (a) identification of the ideal government Web site, (b) the Internet's use as a tool for communicating with constituents, (c) Congressional Web sites as a tool for constituents to communicate with others, (d) the target publics and primary goals of Congressional Web sites, (e) the opportunities and obstacles of managing the sites, and (f) the preferred channels for receiving constituent communication.

### Congressional Offices Responses

*The ideal government Web site.* The first set of highly scheduled questions asked legislators to respond about the ideal Web site for Congressional representatives. These normative questions are compared to the data collected about the actual Web sites in part two of this study. Table 1 reports the results. Virtually all (one did not respond) legislative offices agreed that the WWW should help them in

TABLE 1  
Congressional Web Site Potentiality and Actual Uses

	M	SD
Government Web sites like ours should be designed to		
Provide up-to-date and useful information to constituents.	4.80	.38
Provide up-to-date and useful information to the media.	4.21	.88
Provide up-to-date and useful information to corporate officials.	3.75	1.38
Offer the opportunity for constituent response.	4.83	.46
Offer timely responses to constituent concerns.	4.43	1.14
Offer useful links to other Web sites.	4.36	.96
The Internet has made it possible for my office to		
Communicate with more constituents than ever before.	4.29	.74
Communicate with more corporations than ever before.	3.00	1.30
Communicate with more media outlets than ever before.	3.68	1.44
Express our views on important political issues.	4.33	.88
Inform the media about important issues.	3.69	1.39
Inform corporate officials about important issues.	3.07	1.41
Communication through the Internet makes it possible for the		
people communicating with my office to		
Clearly understand one another.	3.82	1.20
Collaborate with one another.	3.14	1.51
Persuade one another.	3.17	1.49
Manipulate one another.	1.92	1.29
Discuss ideas with one another.	3.81	1.42
Engage in continuous dialogue with one another.	3.75	1.30

Note. Scaled from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*).  $N = 31$ .



their efforts to provide constituents ( $M = 4.80, SD = .38$ ) and the media ( $M = 4.21, SD = .88$ ) with up-to-date information. Interviewees also believed that the Internet provides an opportunity for constituents to respond directly to them ( $M = 4.83, SD = .46$ ) and allows their office to provide a timely response ( $M = 4.43, SD = 1.14$ ). Respondents also believed that their Web sites should offer links to other relevant sites that would be of interest to their constituents ( $M = 4.36, SD = .96$ ).

***The Internet's use as a tool for communicating with constituents.*** The second set of questions asked legislative aides to rate how effective the Web is for communicating with their different constituencies. These questions were intended to tap into actual uses of the Internet and are compared with the normative answers discussed later. Congressional offices value the Internet as a way to communicate with a variety of constituents. Respondents agreed that the Internet facilitated communication with more constituents than ever before ( $M = 4.29, SD = .74$ ), but most did not agree that it helped them communicate with corporations ( $M = 3.0, SD = 1.3$ ). Interviewees also agreed that the Internet allowed their Congressperson to effectively express his or her views on important political issues ( $M = 4.33, SD = .88$ ). The interviewees had mixed responses as to whether the Internet had improved their communication with the media ( $M = 3.68, SD = 1.44$ ). Congressional offices seem to view the Internet as a positive tool for communicating with citizen publics but do not necessarily use it as a tool for communicating with corporate publics or the media.

***Congressional Web sites as a tool for constituents to communicate with others.*** The third set of questions asked legislative offices to report how they viewed their Web site as a tool for their constituents to reach out to others. Overall, the means for these questions were the lowest in the study with only moderate support for the dialogic potential of congressperson-to-constituent and constituent-to-constituent communication. The respondents moderately agreed that the Internet makes it possible for people to clearly understand one another ( $M = 3.82, SD = 1.20$ ), whereas few believed that it allowed people to collaborate with one another ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.51$ ). The legislative aides moderately agreed that their sites functioned as spaces where constituents could discuss ideas with one another ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.42$ ) or where citizens could engage in dialogue with one another ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.30$ ). Respondents also reported that they did not view their Web sites as places where one person or group could manipulate others ( $M = 1.92, SD = 1.29$ ) or persuade others ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.49$ ). The larger than expected standard deviations show that there was wide variance in the Congressional answers.

The first set of data reports quantitative measures of what Congressional offices think of the ideal Web site for constituent communication and the second set is their actual use of the Internet for relationship building. The second data set included the 10 moderately scheduled interview questions which asked the

32<sup>1</sup> legislative interviewees to further explain how their Congressperson's Web site is used for constituent relationship building (see the Appendix). Selected answers are reported later.

***Target publics and primary goals.*** The interviewees were asked to identify which specific groups or organizations the legislators were targeting through their Web sites and what special services they provided to these publics. Virtually all interviewees (30 out of 32) said that their primary public was their constituents. Information provided to Web site visitors included the following: media information (news releases, etc.), tourist information, service information (where to obtain flags, White House tickets, etc.), student or child sections, and informational links.

Interviewees also spoke about the primary goals of the Web site and how those goals are met. Information, education, and communication were considered the primary goals in almost every case. Many interviewees mentioned the importance of keeping constituents updated after the "anthrax scare" and informing the public about local and state services. One interviewee noted the following: "The primary goal is to provide the latest information to the public. Web sites are the new vehicle for communication with Congressmen ... especially because of the recent anthrax scare."

***Opportunities and obstacles.*** The researchers then asked the interviewees whether the legislator's Web site provided ample opportunity for user input. With the exception of one interviewee who said that "the site was not designed for responding, it was designed to inform," and one interviewee who suggested that the site has only "basic contact information," the remainder answered affirmatively (29 out of 32). It appears that Congressional offices believe that they are providing the means for constituents to reach them.

Several constraints influencing legislators' use of the WWW exist. The biggest obstacles for Congressional offices include the following: keeping the site updated (expertise, time, design, etc.), answering e-mail messages, getting the word out about the site, security, making the site user-friendly, and dealing with governmental restrictions.

***Preferred channels for constituent communication.*** The interviewees were asked to rank the most influential ways that constituents could communicate with their office. They were given the following nine choices: personal e-mail, form e-mail (action alerts, etc.), personal fax, form fax, personal letter, form letter, telephone calls, personal visits, and visits from lobbyists. Most respondents were able to identify clear preferences for their top five communication channels from the

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<sup>1</sup>There are only 31 responses to the three questions discussed earlier because one interviewee's office had a policy against surveys. However, the interviewee did respond to the open-ended questions reported earlier.

list. The response with the most first choices was personalized e-mails, with 12 interviewees reporting that this was the “most preferred and influential way” to communicate a position or concern to the Congressperson. Table 2 shows that legislators seem to value constituent input to come in the form of personal contact, including personalized e-mail ( $n = 23$ ), personalized letters ( $n = 21$ ), phone calls and personalized faxes ( $n = 19$  for each respectively), and in-person visits ( $n = 18$ ). Least preferred and influential communication channels included form letters and visits from lobbyists. Worth noting here is that the Anthrax scare in 2001 has altered the desirability of legislative offices receiving any form of postal mail. Seven interviewees noted that because of the Anthrax scare they now encourage more e-mail use by constituents.

### Measuring Dialogic Relationship Building

RQ2 asked the following: “How does the design of Congressional Web sites foster dialogic communication with constituents?” The second part of this study examined Congressional Web sites for dialogic potential using the mediated dialogic scale. Table 3 reports the individual percentages of each of the 36 features of dialogic Web site design. The means, standard deviations, and composite scores for each of the five indexes (ease of use, usefulness of information, timeliness of information, interactivity, and return visits) are also reported.

Table 3 shows that the highest scoring category of the index is “Ease of Use,” with a composite score (or average score for all items in the category) of .62. The highest item in this category is “major links to the rest of the Web site,” with 99% of all Congressional sites providing visitors with links to various parts of the site as well as links to outside Web sites. The lowest item in this category is “site map,” with only 12% of the Congressional Web sites providing visitors with site maps (or

TABLE 2  
Preferred Channels to Receive Constituent  
Communication

<i>Channel</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>
Personalized e-mail	23
Personalized letter	21
Personalized fax	19
Phone call	19
Personal visit	18
Form letter fax	16
Form letter	14
Lobbyists	11
No preference	4

*Note.* Respondents were asked to rank order their preferred and most influential channel of communication. Many respondents gave multiple answers.  $N = 32$ .

TABLE 3  
Percentage of Congressional Web Site Inclusion  
of Dialogic Features

	<i>Total</i>
Ease of Use Index (9 items; $M = .62, SD = .28$ )	
Time first page takes to load	2 sec
Information is accessible with images turned off	.76
Ease of finding information	
Site map	.12
Important information available on first page	.55
Major links to rest of site	.99
Search engine box	.34
Logo of organization	.68
Image maps are self-explanatory	.49
Links to other Web sites	.91
Low graphic reliance	.73
Usefulness of Information Index (12 items $M = .56, SD = .40$ )	
Media publics (7 items; $M = .55, SD = .33$ )	
Press releases	.95
Biographical Information	.99
Philosophy and Mission statement	.09
Speeches and Policy papers	.24
Downloadable graphics	.62
Identifies constituent base	.90
Audio or video clips	.15
Citizen Publics (5 items; $M = .57, SD = .51$ )	
Bilingual and multilingual options	.06
Indicates committee assignments	.90
Clearly stated positions on issues	.65
Kids' section	.34
Tourist information	.93
Timeliness of Information Index (3 items; $M = .35, SD = .28$ )	
Last updated time and date	.13
News or public information within last 30 days	.67
Can subscribe for regular information via e-mail	.26
Interactivity Index (4 items; $M = .29, SD = .43$ )	
Opportunity for user response	.94
Opportunity for voting	.04
Fill out survey or give opinion on issue(s)	.13
Send a postcard	.05
Return Visits Index (7 items; $M = .23, SD = .21$ )	
Explicit statement invites visitors to return	.12
"Bookmark Now" statement	.01
News forums (regularly scheduled)	.07
Questions & Answers	.09
Calendar of events	.29
Downloadable information (PDF files, etc.)	.35
Information that can be requested by mail or e-mail	.57

*Note.*  $N = 100$ .

tables of contents) of what can be found on the entire Web site. Most sites lacked search engine boxes that visitors could use to quickly find key information (34%).

The second highest scoring category is "Usefulness of Information," with an index score of .56 (.55 and .57 for constituent and media publics, respectively). In regard to media publics, the data indicate that almost all legislators include news releases (95%) and biographical information (99%) on their sites for media visitors. Only 9% of the legislators surveyed included information about their governing philosophy or goals (mission) as elected officials. One in four (24%) included speeches or policy papers. In regard to constituent publics, the data indicate that most legislators include information about tourism (93%) and committee assignments (90%). Two thirds (65%) of the Congressional Web sites provide clearly articulated policy statements on their sites. Six percent of the legislators maintain bilingual or multilingual Web sites.

The "Timeliness of Information" index was .35. Only 13% of the sites clearly indicated that they had been updated in the last 30 days and only one quarter (26%) gave visitors the opportunity to sign up for information to be sent to them on a regular basis (usually monthly).

The "Interactivity" index of .29 was also quite low. Although 94% of the sites offered visitors the opportunity to send a message to the Congressperson, only a small percentages of the sites offered visitors the opportunity to voice their opinion (13%), send a postcard or message to someone via the site (5%), or vote on a relevant issue (4%).

The final index of mediated dialogue is "Generating Return Visits." This index score of .23 was the lowest of the composite indexes. For relationships to develop, there must be regular contact between interactants. Congressional Web sites in this study did not encourage visitors to return. Only 12% of the sites explicitly asked people to come back in the future and only one site used the popular "Bookmark Now" option that is regularly used by many Web sites. Only 29% posted a calendar of events and only 7% of the Web sites offered regularly scheduled news forums or question and answer sessions for disseminating information to constituents.

## DISCUSSION

### **Dialogic Intent Versus Dialogic Capacity**

The interviews with the Congressional offices and the subsequent analysis of the random Web sites provide a detailed picture of the dialogic intentions of the elected officials and the actual dialogic capacity of their mediated outreach efforts. Interviewees noted that they believed the Internet and the WWW made it possible for them to communicate with constituents, express their views on important political issues, provide useful and up-to-date information to both the media and their constituents, have constituents contact them and respond to them in a timely

way, and provide useful links for visitors to their sites. The data from the Web site analysis shows mixed findings about the capacity of the sites to provide these features of dialogue.

***Dialogic potential.*** The Congressional interviewees seem to understand the enormous potential of the Internet for constituent relations. Twenty-three of the 32 offices ranked personal e-mail messages from constituents as an influential communication force. Most believed that their sites should offer useful links to visitors and the data suggest that they do so. Additionally, the interviewees believed that the ideal site would offer the opportunity for constituent response. The survey of the 100 sites shows that 94% of the sites provide an opportunity for visitors to communicate with the elected official. Finally, there appears to be agreement that Web sites should and are providing useful information to constituent and media publics.

These mediated features of the Congressional Web sites are foundations for dialogue and offer a good start for elected leaders to build relationships with constituents. A problem that one encounters when talking about relationship building and dialogue, however, is understanding what exactly the other person is talking about (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In the theoretical sense, dialogue is more than a one-way transfer of information. However, politicians may believe that providing information (one-way communication) is “dialogue.” Congressional Web sites appear to be very effective at one-way information dissemination. So when politicians say that the Internet allows them to “engage in dialogue,” as the interviewees suggested, it is also important to take into account how many messages they actually receive each day. The results vary widely from office to office, but 50 to 60 e-mail messages a day from constituents is common. More typical is twice that or 500 to 1,000 messages per week. Indeed, many Congressional representatives stated that they receive 3,000 to 5,000 messages per week. The interviewees noted that they always respond to messages from constituents who include their name and address. However, many offices get deluged with e-mail messages or “action alerts” from nonconstituents. Given the dynamic of volume alone, the fact that Congressional representatives tend to see the WWW as primarily an informational medium is not surprising.

What is clear from both the interviews with legislators and the evaluation of their Web sites is that most politicians see their Web sites as one-way communication tools—much like the other mass media. As one interviewee noted, “our site is a multipurpose site. It’s an information resource to learn about the Senator and the Senate, It’s a Portal providing links to useful information and a Pulpit from which the Senator may speak about the issues and promote things.” To get at the way that politicians view the WWW as a communication tool, we sought answers through our first research question: “In what ways do Congressional representatives use their Web sites for constituent relationship building?” Congressional representatives are not taking advantage of the Web’s potential for relationship building and tend to use it as a one-way tool of communication.

***Dialogic limitations.*** The low scores on how the public can use Congressional Web sites suggest that the Web functions for most Congressional representatives as a mediator of the elected official–constituent relationship. Other relationships are, however, possible through these sites. Congressional offices seem to have missed the fact that their sites can become portals for public discussion, debate, and deliberation. Most legislators use their Web sites to transmit controlled information and to inform constituents. Two-way communication is minimal. One interviewee noted the following: “The Web is a very passive medium, not active at all. Our Web page isn’t designed for two-way communication.” Congressional Web sites are not used to build relationships with (and between) constituents because they are not interactive, do not keep visitors on their sites, and do not provide visitors with any compelling reasons to return to their sites. The finding that legislators do not use the WWW for relationship building is not surprising in light of what we know of politicians and symbolic representation. These Congressional Web sites are what Hinckley (1994) would view as substitutes for genuine dialogue.

Symbolic dialogue includes such strategies as allowing visitors to “respond” (or give an opinion)—the implicit assumption being that their position will matter. Symbolic communication channels, however, do not allow individuals to actually engage another in dialogue or to really make their case; rather, the intent is to placate an individual through “a voicing of their opinion.” The issue of symbolic representation brings us to our second research question (RQ2): “How do Congressional Web sites foster dialogic communication with constituents?”

Congressional Web sites are not dialogic. Although the Congressional offices are providing easy to use sites with useful information, these are only the first two steps of fostering dialogue. Of particular interest to us are the low scores on “interactivity” or “dialogic capacity” that show that the hard part of dialogue is not being attempted by these elected officials. The only move that politicians make to dialogically communicate with constituents via their Web sites comes in the form of an opportunity to “send a response” (or message). Most Congressional Web sites do not even do a very good job of providing timely information and keeping constituents updated—unless someone is visiting their Web site to find out the hours of Disneyland or the local museum. The reasons why sites are not dialogic can be understood in the answers of the interviewees. They reported that there is so much to do in a Congressional office and that every day Congressional staffers are asked to do a thousand different jobs with real-life implications. Their Web site is not an immediate priority and the resources dedicated to its design, use, and modification are lacking. More importantly, the very low scores about the use of their sites to facilitate dialogue among their constituents show that they fail to see the various ways that their Web sites can foster dialogue. This lack of vision may be one of the major factors limiting the dialogic capacity of their sites.

The Congressional offices identified personalized e-mails as the most frequent and most valued way for constituents to reach them. Yet, the high volume of e-mail messages mentioned earlier, and the recognition that many politicians do not even

answer (much less read) their own e-mail, begs the question of how mediated dialogue could actually be enacted. Dialogue ultimately hinges on the issue of interaction and communication—whether mediated or face-to-face. For dialogue to occur, participants must communicate. As Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) noted, there are steps that can be taken to increase the likelihood of “webbed” dialogue (providing contact information, keeping all information up to date, offering automated information, etc.), but facilitating dialogue is not the same as genuine dialogue. Congress Online (2002) identified five building blocks for effective governmental Web sites: audience, content, interactivity, usability, and innovation. The use of the Internet by Congressional representatives actually begs the question of how to create dialogue with constituents. Several strategies that have been noted by Congress Online (2002) and Kent and Taylor (2002) include the following: holding online chat sessions where individuals can write to someone in real time with questions, providing calendars of appearances where key organizational members (or representatives) may be reached (office hours, public speaking opportunities, etc.), electronic town hall meetings, or arranging for liaisons to be accessible to constituents so that they might at least speak with someone who has the politician’s ear. Such strategies are minimal attempts to foster dialogue with constituents. With some small effort on the part of politicians, dozens of other dialogic possibilities could be identified that might actually lead to better governance and more effective democracy.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought additional evidence to show if, and how, Congress is using the mediated governmental environment to build relationships with constituents. The authors would be remiss not to note the limitations of this study. In future research constituents might be interviewed to learn about their actual experience with Congressional Web sites. Future research should study actual interactions via the Internet between elected officials and their constituents to better study dialogue. Additionally, future studies should interview more Congressional aides to ensure a more generalizable sample.

Given the increasing ubiquity of the WWW, understanding its use by politicians is vitally important and this research is but one piece of understanding mediated democracy. One of the issues that the research conducted here reveals is the extent to which politicians have embraced the Internet. Every Congressional representative has a Web site (even if it is only a home page with contact information). The use of the WWW by certain types of organizations (education, the media, politicians, etc.) has important implications for mediated communication, dialogic theory, elected officials, and citizens. As the WWW becomes more common as a tool of democracy, its persuasiveness and capacity to allow dialogic communication become more of a concern.



The WWW is rapidly reaching the point where it will compete with other established media for the eyes and ears of publics. The Internet offers the potential for dialogue whereas print and broadcast media cannot offer such opportunities. Unless something is done to transform the WWW into a tool of democracy based on dialogue rather than just another advertising tool, the vision of the WWW as a tool of democracy will be lost.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented to the 2003 Conference of the International Communication Association, Public Relations Division, San Diego, CA. The authors wish to acknowledge the research assistance of James Dienes and Steven Swistak.

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## APPENDIX

1. What specific groups or organizations does your Web site focus on and what special services does it provide for these groups or organizations?
2. What do you see as the primary goal(s) of your Web site and how does it accomplish this task?
3. How does your Web site provide ample opportunity for user responses?
4. Approximately how many e-mail messages do you receive per week (or per month) and what percentage of those messages receives a response?
5. How does your Web site generate return visits for constituents?
6. Is your Web site regularly updated and when was the last time the Web site was updated?
7. What is the biggest obstacle for your office's Web site?
8. Are you familiar with nonprofits use of action alerts (a program which generates e-mail or fax responses to political issues)?
9. How do you view your constituents using this method as a means to reach you?
10. Please rank the preferred and most influential means for your constituents to reach you.