THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MODERN-DAY POLITICS

The social media must be used by Parliaments, Parliamentarians, governments and political parties as they are highly effective tools to involve and inform citizens in public policy-making and in the formation of governments. But all these groups must develop strategies to deal with a wide array of both positive and negative effects of these rapidly growing media, argued participants in the final plenary session.

The positive effects of the various forms of social media were laid out as Members recorded a high degree of their own participation in some or all of the social media. These media can empower the public in a way that is far faster, cheaper and more pervasive than other forms of communication. They encourage pluralism, reach young people more than other media and encourage greater participation, accountability and transparency.

Parliamentarians can use their “celebrity” status in such media as Facebook and Twitter to interest people in politics and political issues. Social media have been effective in election campaign fund-raising, especially encouraging small contributions from individual voters. But delegates cautioned that the social media alone cannot change the world and institutions and individuals in the political field must learn how to distinguish between good and bad uses. The uncontrolled nature of social media postings means they can be misleading and manipulative and can misinform. Irresponsible and irrelevant material can also overload readers and swamp genuine political reporting and comment – and the capacity of individual Members to deal with them.

The social media can be used to fuel rioting, as happened in the United Kingdom in 2011. They are not yet fully available in developing countries and, even in countries with good urban internet access, they are often not readily accessible by rural citizens and by the poor. However, the workshop noted the social media are such powerful, effective and low-cost information sources that the problems surrounding them cannot and should not stop Parliaments and Members from developing effective ways to use them to inform responsibly and, in so doing, help teach young people how to separate good information from bad.

Transforming society

The rapidly advancing world of information technology affects all spheres of life but none more so than politics and the replacement of authoritarian governance with democratic governance, said the Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives, Hon. Aminu Tambuwal, MHR.

Easy access to information from around the world promotes liberty, competition and choice. It can also be used to advance respect for the rule of law and human rights and other indices of good governance such as equality and free and credible elections. Use of the new social media enables group thinking to promote concepts such as the independence of the judiciary, the development of civil society, multiparty systems and democratic institutions which are participatory, transparent and accountable, he said.

Mr Tambuwal added that the social media challenge the established media by enabling individuals to report their own views on governments. Their ease of access and wide coverage enable wide-spread political participation and such developments in one part of the world can affect other regions very rapidly.
But the Nigerian Speaker cautioned that the interface between technology and social interaction is not yet universally available. Computers, cell phones and internet access are still not available to large sections of the populations of developing countries.

**A force for good**

Describing the social media as a huge source of information with enormous potential to inform and connect people, Dr the Hon. P.J. Kurian, MP, Deputy Chairperson of India’s Rajya Sabha, said YouTube, Facebook and other such media empower and unite people. Political leaders can raise social and political issues and shape public opinion, and the media can give a voice to those who previously did not have one. With connections to billions of people, and reaching millions of users daily, they make more information available to people than ever before, remove barriers to collective action and promote pluralism. As they are more widely used by young people, Dr Kurian saw them as a way to engage youth in politics.

He encouraged policy-makers, political parties and MPs to use the new media to better understand the views and needs of the people, and to use it to reach the people with more information which he said will in turn re-inforce public trust in the role MPs are playing on the people’s behalf. It will also provide them with the information they need to hold their representatives accountable in a more transparent system of governance.

While the public can use the social media to influence political debate, he said they can also be used by political parties to mobilize voters. More generally, the social media can also be used to enable faster responses to crises.

But he also encouraged caution in the use of the social media. Much of the information being disseminated is anonymous and can be dangerous and misleading. Domination by special interests and people expert only in communications is also easy.

**Challenging perspectives**

A Canadian MP took a different position, urging MPs to understand the social media better to use it more effectively.

Mr Russ Hiebert, MP, noted the social media focus on celebrity gossip, so MPs can use their own celebrity status to focus attention on political policies and programmes, to answer questions and to respond to the needs of voters. Public expectations of participation, accountability and transparency are rising, as is social media use, so MPs can use them to improve their visibility and build support, as well as to raise funds, encourage voters to go to the polls and get responses on issues from stakeholders. Using Members’ celebrity status enables them to put politics at the forefront in the public eye, exchange information and enable constituents to see that politicians are active, real people who are working for them.

He added that the traditional media also follow politicians on the social media so material Members post of the social media can get them news coverage as well.

Mr Hiebert said that the Obama presidential campaign in the 2008 United States elections had more than 13 million addresses it could use to contact voters and get them out to vote. The campaign found the social media could also be used to solicit donations, especially small donations.

The Canadian MP advised that the internet should be integrated into all political activities. Members should claim their names on social media sites before others do and use their names to misrepresent them. Social media sites should be monitored and updated continually to show that the Member is up to date, relevant, active and responsive. Members should link their sites to other community sites, which they should select with care to show their involvement in their community. And sites they use and are linked to should be monitored to ensure the same messages are consistently given on each site.
Mr Hiebert also disputed the common view that the social media can only be used to reach young people. He noted that the average age of Twitter users is 39 and 64 per cent are over age 35. Similarly, the average age of Facebook users is 38 and 61 per cent are over 35.

Not necessarily in the public interest
A cautionary approach to the social media was advised by the Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization, Prof. Tim Unwin. Access to technology, which currently is still far from universal, will not create democracy although it can be used to help democratize a country. If not used properly, it can lead to damaging errors and can in fact undermine democracy.

The social media are still too young to judge their long-term effect on democracy, he said. For example, while 13 per cent of the world’s population is on Facebook, it is not clear whether this is a large or small percentage. By operating outside of geographical limits and traditional time constraints, the social media can create communities anytime, anywhere. They are the cheapest form of communication, but only for those with access. They create information, but they also discourage the acceptance of information which is filtered down from the top to the masses. The social media are changing the information elite and the direction of information flows.

Prof. Unwin said that MPs can use the social media in various positive ways; but if they don’t respond to social media messages they appear to be out of touch, unresponsive or uncaring. Parliaments need to manage their use of information and communications technology very carefully.

While governments cannot control information on the internet, they can use it to spread disinformation or to increase their influence inordinately. The social media invades privacy and allows governments, MPs and others to tailor information to what the public wants rather than what they need to know. Cyber security is a very fast-moving area and the world must determine how information can be protected.

The poor and the disabled can be marginalized, and the development divide between rural and urban areas can be increased by limited accessibility.

Prof. Unwin emphasized that technology can be misused and the social media may not operate in the best interests of the people or of democracy. They can be counter-democratic, he said, noting that rioting in parts of the United Kingdom had been fuelled by the use of the social media.

Questions raised
A South African Member, Hon. Santosh Vinita Kalyan, MP, questioned whether electronic communications were environmentally friendly and agreed with Prof. Unwin that the long-term implications of social networking are not yet known. She also questioned whether comments by Members made in one of the social media are protected by parliamentary privilege.

Prof. Unwin replied that information and communications technologies are not always environmentally friendly.

Mr Hiebert said that privilege protects Members only for comments made in the Chamber. He said the Parliament of Canada has adapted to the demands of information and communications technology such as by providing live video coverage of the Chamber and some committee meetings, putting Members’ voting records online and publishing Members expenses and government documents. Hansards of proceedings are available within 24 hours. Skype is also being used by Members to meet constituents, thus overcoming the great distances between Members in Ottawa and constituents across the country.
Hon. P.P.P. Moatlhodi, MP, of Botswana expressed concerns that rural constituents who can neither read nor write are being left behind by technology and increased government focus on its use. Hon. Philemon Moongo, MP, of Namibia concurred, adding that the poor and the victims of social injustice have no access to the social media and even the traditional media are not interested in social injustice.

Mr Hiebert, however, noted that pictures can present information to the illiterate and Prof. Unwin pointed to technological developments that may soon enable devices to speak to people rather than just presenting them with written text. But he added that new ways must be found to reach people in rural areas and to reach people with disabilities.

Another South African, Hon. Cornelia September, MP questioned whether Parliaments and the CPA are adapting their rules and procedures to accommodate new technologies, agreeing with the lead speakers that the new media can present a threat to democracy.

**Successful electronic outreach**

Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock of the United Kingdom presented the conference with an ongoing example of how to use the social media effectively. Explaining that his Branch and his Region were supporting the addition to the Commonwealth Games of events for the disabled along the lines of the Paralympics which had recently been staged very highly successfully in London, he said he and others had Tweeted the idea and were getting a huge positive response very quickly. This generated support for the idea and demonstrated that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference was active and involved.

Tanzanian MP Hon. Zitto Kabwe presented other examples, explaining that Members had used the social media to generate support for changes to the copyright laws to protect authors’ rights.

Members could also use the social media to mobilize support for censure motions against Ministers.

Mr John Hargreaves, MLA, of the Australian Capital Territory suggested cabinet meetings could be conducted on Twitter for a set period to enable Ministers to respond to the public. However, he also warned that governments can seek to block information by using their control over the relay infrastructure.

**Information overload**

A Member from the Isle of Man, Hon. Steve Rodan, SHK, voiced concerns about the effect of technology on the work of Members. How do Members manage the communications expectations of constituents who look for instant responses rather than considered responsible answers? The quantity of information has expanded, but has the quality of information suffered?

Baroness Gardner of Parkes said that as a Member of the United Kingdom Parliament’s upper House she had little help to deal with the flood of information. A Member who answered everything he or she received would have no time to do anything else. She added that communications advances made possible many changes to work practices which did not contribute to healthy living, including moving children away from exercise.

Prof. Unwin suggested developing strategies on the use of technology such as making full use of automated responses which are becoming more sophisticated.

Mr Hiebert said his automated email response asks senders to send him their name and postal address if they want an answer. He only answers by mail. He also advised Members to set up group pages on Facebook so no responses were required. He added that these sites should be monitored so inappropriate comments could be removed quickly.

**Stopping misinformation**
Mr Rodan was among several speakers who questioned how Members can differentiate between good and unreliable information and how they avoid having their communications systems swamped by material from pressure groups or other interests. Hon. Request Muntanga, MP, of Zambia also sought ways of separating true information from misleading material, asking how the electronic publication of misinformation can be stopped. Processes to stop or minimize the publication of false or misleading information was also sought by Hon. Lebohang Ntsinyi, MP, of Lesotho. She suggested that guidelines or good practices for the successful handling of electronic information could be developed. Dr the Hon. A. Chakrapani, MLC, of Andhra Pradesh agreed that social media and other electronic sources can pose serious problems when they publish unreliable information. He asked how they could be controlled.

Raising a different type of problem produced by the new technologies, Hon. Christine Bako Abia, MP, of Uganda reported that students writing examinations had begun using some of the shorthand abbreviations developed in text messaging.

A careful response
Shri Kurian said governments are examining the issue of how – and whether – to try to control what is published on the internet. Mr Hiebert warned that attempts to regulate content or enforce codes of conduct would have to be considered very carefully. He recommended publicae.net as a safe internet resource designed for politicians which published content on which they could rely. Prof. Unwin, however, pointed to an unintended benefit from the publication of both reliable information and misinformation: learning to separate good information from bad is a valuable ability to teach young people. He and Mr Hiebert agreed that social media are still relatively recent phenomena and unintended consequences are still being identified. For example, Prof. Unwin pointed to concerns in China that the rapidly growing use of mobile phones is leading to a decline in the ability of students to write Chinese characters. He added, however, that advances in technology could soon provide electronic alternatives to the ability to read and write. Mr Hiebert added that the social media have effectively opened a huge experimental area whose effects are still developing. This should not, however, be an excuse for Parliamentarians to avoid participating in this emerging form of communications. Shri Kurian also told Members that while the social media is not universally available, it is still more accessible to the poor than other media are, and that it holds great potential to improve the lives of poor people in the future.