GUIDELINES FOR THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF PARLIAMENTARY WEB SITES

Approved by the Inter-Parliamentary Council
at its 166th session (Amman, 6 May 2000)

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Introduction

In recent years, acceptance of the Internet as a global information medium has attained phenomenal proportions. Although no firm conclusions can yet be drawn from the public debate on the Internet's impact on democratic institutions, it has undeniably led to a dramatic change in the way many people communicate and increased the ability of institutions, businesses and individuals to channel information.

Parliaments are well placed to take advantage of the Internet's ability to disseminate electronic documents quickly, cheaply and efficiently. Moreover, as new communication technologies make it possible to establish a closer relationship between citizens and their representatives, it is increasingly likely that the Internet's role in the political process will evolve beyond the mere dissemination of information.

The contours of the future affinity between politics and the Internet are gradually coming into focus. Information technology looks set to provide an electronic boost to democracy as unconstrained access to legislative information and the interactive nature of parliamentary Web sites make the legislative process and parliamentary proceedings more transparent and subject to closer public scrutiny.

The first steps in this direction have already been taken. The total number of parliaments operating a site on the World Wide Web is growing day by day. The Internet is expanding its reach and gradually putting paid to the notion that this new medium is least available where it is most needed to promote democracy.

Yet much remains to be done to ensure that every national parliament can operate its own Internet site as part of a global parliamentary network and that the practical potential of existing parliamentary Web sites is enhanced for the benefit of both legislators and broader circles of Internet users. Time and again, the IPU, as the world Organisation of national parliaments, has been urged to take the initiative in this regard.

The Union has made considerable progress in promoting the use of modern communication technologies, such as the Internet, for inter-parliamentary communications. Its Web site (http://www.ipu.org) has become an indispensable tool for dissemination of parliamentary information on the Internet. PARLINE and PARLIT - the two on-line databases developed by IPU to make information on the structure and functioning of national parliaments easily accessible to all Internet users - have proved particularly popular.

Feedback from these users convinced IPU that its site had a specific role to play as a focal point for universal parliamentary liaison on the Web. Direct links with the sites of individual parliaments will both facilitate navigation between them and supplement the general parliamentary information available on the IPU site with more detailed data from national sites.

But this task is complicated by the absence of many parliaments from the Internet and the lack of harmony in the content and structure of existing parliamentary Web sites. There is a distinct need for some measure of standardisation of the information placed on such sites and this can only be achieved through a concerted effort by the parliaments concerned. Harmonisation should be a gradual process, in which the diversity of political systems and practices, and the language and cultural traditions of each country as reflected in its parliamentary site are fully respected.

An analysis of exhaustive data compiled by the IPU Secretariat in summer 1998 suggested that the content of a typical parliamentary Web site is likely to follow common patterns and that the prevailing features can be documented and systematised in the form of general guidelines applicable to all parliamentary sites.

Such Guidelines were prepared by the IPU Secretariat at the request of the Executive Committee. National parliaments were subsequently consulted through the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments (ASGP). The consolidated draft is presented in the following chapters which contain a series of recommendations concerning various aspects of the content and structure of parliamentary Web sites. Grouped into three sections based on logical criteria, the Guidelines cover essential content, the use of hyperlinks and interactivity tools, as well as general usability and design considerations. Each set of recommendations contains two clusters, the first of which includes universally recommended elements and the second optional ones.

The Guidelines are practically oriented so as to facilitate the task of parliaments embarking on the initial planning of their Web sites before the job is handed over to Web site designers. Parliaments that already operate Web sites are expected to harmonise them with the Guidelines as soon and as much as technically feasible. It goes without saying that implementation of such harmonisation practices should be carried out in full respect of the inherent diversity of political systems and practices, as well as of the language and cultural traditions of each country.

Internet technology is constantly evolving. It may therefore become necessary to review and update the Guidelines in the light of future developments. The IPU Secretariat will be entrusted with this task and will also be charged with the preparation of regular surveys of progress in the practical implementation of the Guidelines.
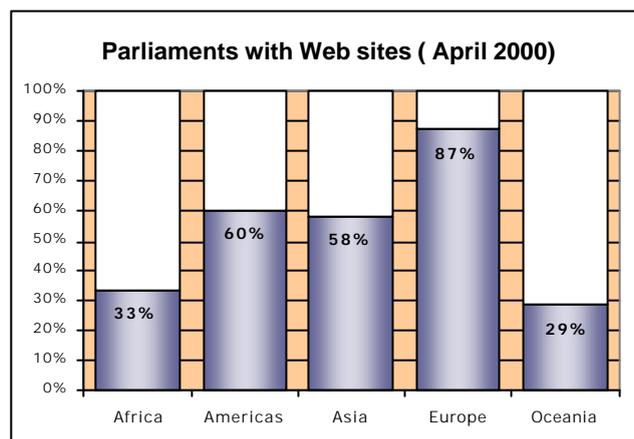
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Contours of the present situation

A distinctive feature of the last decade of the twentieth century has been the exponential growth of public interest in the World Wide Web. National parliaments have been quick to catch up with the general trend. Nearly two-thirds of them were operating their own Web sites by the turn of the century.

As of 1 April 2000, parliaments in 101 countries have established their presence on the Web. This represents 57% of the total number of parliaments. Moreover, parliamentary chambers in bicameral parliaments often have separate Web sites.

In terms of geographical distribution of parliamentary Web sites by continent, the situation is relatively heterogeneous. While Europe leads the way with 87% of its national parliaments operating Web sites, Africa lags behind with a mere 33% (16 countries out of 48), as does Oceania with just 29%. More than half of all national parliaments in Asia and the Americas are present on the Web.

Parliaments with Web sites (April 2000)

Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Oceania
33%	60%	58%	87%	29%

It should be noted that the situation is rapidly changing. Over the last two years, the overall number of parliaments with Web sites has nearly tripled and many of the newcomers are from the continent of Africa. The Inter-Parliamentary Union has been instrumental in setting up some of these sites through its programme of technical assistance to parliaments.

With well over half the world's parliaments operating Web sites already, it is a fact of political life that a parliamentary presence on the Internet is no longer an option but a must. However, questions such as the appropriate content of a parliamentary Web site and whether newcomers can learn from the experience of their forerunners must still be addressed.

During the summer of 1998, IPU conducted an in-depth survey of all parliamentary sites then existing on the Web. The purpose of the exercise was to identify the prevailing features of such sites in terms of both content and structure, to evaluate their comparative usefulness and eventually to establish a checklist of elements that could be systematised and recommended for inclusion in parliamentary Web sites in the form of general guidelines applicable to all such sites.

As stipulated in the decision of the Union's Executive Committee (Windhoek, April 1998) that authorised the survey, "*such guidelines should contain recommendations for inclusion of various information sections in parliamentary Web sites and directions with regard to language use and implementation of technically advanced features of the site. The guidelines should be practically oriented so as to facilitate the task of parliaments embarking upon initial planning or subsequent modification of their Web sites before the job is passed over to actual Web designers*".

The survey was carried out by the IPU Secretariat with the assistance of external collaborators using standard Internet-connected computers. Individual Web sites of some 125 parliamentary chambers in 82 countries were visited in the period from 5 to 18 August 1998 and scrutinised on the basis of 48 "yes-or-no" criteria. The resulting data were systemised in table form. This exercise yielded a "snapshot" of the state of all parliamentary sites on the Web, thus making it possible to compare their respective content, structure and functional characteristics in a methodologically correct manner.

An analysis of the data collected in this way confirmed the hypothesis that the content of a typical parliamentary site is likely to follow a pattern and that most Web sites of national parliaments share a number of prevailing structural features.

For example, introductory pages usually comprised a brief overview of the parliament's history (54% of sites) and information on the parliamentary and/or electoral system (63%) and on presiding officer(s) of parliament (71%). On the other hand, a calendar of parliamentary business was included in only 22% of sites, and only one-third of sites offered the possibility of a "virtual visit" to the parliamentary premises.

A list of members of Parliament was available on 75% of sites and was often sorted in alphabetical order or by constituency and/or party affiliation. Some 49% of sites offered biographical data on members of Parliament, ranging from date of birth and occupation to information on educational background, family members and political activity. A breakdown of seats by party was available on 52% of sites, and 22% provided full results and/or statistics concerning past elections. Some 30% of sites listed the e-mail addresses of at least some parliamentarians and, exceptionally, links to Web homepages of individual members of Parliament.

Most parliamentary sites provided information on legislative bills or proposals and/or enacted legislation in one form or another. 65% contained either the complete text of the National Constitution or excerpts referring to the legislative branch. 37% of sites listed the text of Standing Orders or parliamentary Rules of Procedure. Some 47% of sites presented information on current legislative business in the form of an organisation chart or a textual description. 34% of sites provided access to texts of pending legislation. 43% contained summaries of parliamentary sessions and 14% feature full records of the proceedings. Only 7% of sites provided the full texts of adopted laws within a few days of the date of adoption.

Over 70% of sites contained a list of parliamentary bodies (committees, subcommittees, commissions, etc.). However, only 61% of sites gave the names of the presiding officers of such bodies and 56% the full membership. Contact information concerning these bodies was available in only 21% of cases, while 36% of sites included at least some form of description of the parliamentary bodies' functions and working procedures.

Surprisingly, only one-third of all sites included basic information on how the parliament in question could be contacted (postal address, telephone, fax). However, 65% of sites provided the parliament's e-mail address and some 17% offered a feed-back utility for sending questions and comments to the parliament directly from the Web page. Less than half of all sites (44%) include links to Web sites of other national parliaments and exactly 50% provided links to international and regional inter-parliamentary organisations, such as IPU. In addition, 27% of sites provided links to Web sites of political parties and 14% to those of state and provincial legislatures.

Only 3% of sites (4 out of 125) maintained regular discussion forums where users could put on-line questions to parliamentarians or participate in exchanges of views on specific topics with other members of the electorate. 5% of sites offered the possibility of subscribing to special mailing lists for the circulation of regular e-mail updates on parliamentary activities. Lastly, only 2% of sites were equipped with a facility allowing users to participate in opinion polls concerning general political questions and current issues.

Ease of use of parliamentary Web sites varied greatly too in terms of both technical implementation and navigational and linguistic aspects. For example, a quick-search facility was available on only 21% of sites, a "what's new" page on 28% and a sitemap on 13%.

While 88% of sites used at least one of the respective country's official languages, 76% had a parallel version in English. Sites in foreign languages other than English are rare (12%), and even the parallel English-language version was often incomplete and limited to a few basic pages.

It is noteworthy that 72% of parliamentary Web sites were maintained by national parliaments themselves, 12% by various government services and 16% by third parties on behalf of the respective parliaments.

Further details of information compiled by the IPU in the course of the survey of parliamentary Web sites are readily available from the Union's Secretariat.

A comprehensive analysis of the data compiled was carried out on the basis of generally applicable rules of Web design. This has made it possible to formulate a set of practical recommendations concerning the content and structure of parliamentary Web sites, which are briefly introduced in the following chapters.

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Essential elements of content recommended for inclusion in parliamentary Web sites

3.1 GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE STRUCTURE OF PARLIAMENT

Persons wishing to get acquainted with a given parliament through its Web site should be offered a logical starting point. Such an "overview" page (or an entire section) serves as a point of departure and contains introductory information about the parliament's overall structure and functioning. It usually includes multiple intra-site links with further pages dealing with specific issues.

The layout of the Web site's general information page/section is necessarily distinctive for each parliament and/or parliamentary chamber. However, a number of common content-related elements can be identified.

Recommended elements

- **Overview** of the composition and functions of the national parliament and its constituent bodies, including a description of the specific role of each parliamentary chamber (for bicameral parliaments) and non-plenary bodies (committees, commissions, etc);
- Full text of the **Standing Orders**, Rules of Procedure or similar rule-setting documents;
- Text of the country's **Constitution** (when applicable);
- List of **international and regional parliamentary assemblies** of which the parliament is a member

Optional elements

- Overview of **parliamentary procedure**;
- Explanation of the routine order of **parliamentary business**;
- **Statistics** on the activities of the current legislature;
- Brief **history** of the national parliamentary institution;
- Texts of **official press releases** of the parliament;
- "Guided tour" of the **parliamentary building;**
- Diagram of **seating arrangements** in the parliamentary meeting room;
- Diagram/organization chart of the Secretariat of Parliament together with the name of and other relevant information about the **Secretary General/Clerk** of Parliament;
- Practical information on **access to the parliamentary building, library and archives** (when applicable)

3.2   ELECTORAL SYSTEM, PARTY GROUPS

Representative democracy can only function efficiently if citizens are able to exercise their political rights in full awareness of the underlying election laws. The Web sites of national parliaments are not only a logical place to look for relevant information but also offer user-friendly features which make the task of locating specific documents easier.

Likewise, when parliamentary elections take place in a given country, the Internet becomes the preferred news medium for anyone without access to the country's press or television who needs to know the results of elections as soon as they are made public or - better still - in real time. It is particularly important that relevant electoral data should come from an official source - the parliament itself.

Information on the current breakdown of seats by party within national parliaments is also much sought after. Journalists, political analysts, scholars and many other categories of Internet users rely on parliamentary Web sites for up-to-date information on the relative strength of parties, party coalitions and the political affiliation of individual MPs.

The PARLINE database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union may be viewed as the Internet's one-stop shopping place for information on election results: it covers all the world's parliaments and presents data formatted in a uniform way so as to facilitate cross-country comparisons. However, due to delays in information gathering and processing, PARLINE data is sometimes out of synchrony with the actual state of affairs.

It is clear from the foregoing why information on electoral and party groups is usually assigned a central role on parliamentary Web sites. It is important to include the following components in the corresponding section of the site:

Recommended components

- Explanation of the **election procedure** (voting system, electoral divisions/constituencies, who votes, who can be elected, nomination requirements, who conducts the election, etc.);
- Results of the last elections by **party affiliation** and **constituency**.

Optional components

- **Current composition** of party groups and coalitions;
- Results of last elections by **age**, **gender** and **profession**;
- Texts of relevant **election laws**.

3.3   LEGISLATIVE PROCESS AND DOCUMENTS

For obvious reasons, it is impossible to spell out the intricacies of the legislative process in just a few pages of a parliamentary Web site. Instead, the site should offer a succinct description of parliamentary procedure and provide an elaborate mechanism for search and retrieval of legislative documents, including texts of bills and amendments. It is equally important that

Internet users should be able to obtain information about progress achieved in any specific piece of legislation.

On-line databases and specially designed search mechanisms can achieve a high degree of sophistication, the corollary being that their technical implementation may pose a formidable challenge.

Regardless of the specifics of the document search mechanism implemented on a given parliamentary Web site, the section dealing with the legislative process should contain key components from among those listed below. It is particularly important in this regard to update relevant information regularly so as to reflect the actual status of parliamentary business.

Recommended components

- Schematic explanation of the **legislative process**;
- **Legislative agenda** and schedule of the current session;
- Searchable database of **legislative acts enacted by the current legislature**;
- **Status** of current parliamentary business by bill number, topic, title, date, document code, parliamentary body, etc.

Optional components

- Searchable database of **committee reports**, **records**, **hearings**, **votes** and other parliamentary documents pertaining to the current legislature;
- Searchable database of legislative acts and other parliamentary documents pertaining to at least immediately **preceding legislatures;**
- Special section on **budget and financial legislation**;
- **Summary** or **complete records** of parliamentary debates/sessions;
- Special section devoted to **parliamentary questions and inquiries addressed to the executive branch**;
- **Glossary** of parliamentary procedure;
- Audio and video **Web telecasting of parliamentary sessions**

3.4 PRESIDING OFFICERS

It follows from the institutional prominence of the office of the President (Speaker) of parliament or a parliamentary chamber that this function should feature prominently on the parliamentary Web site. The corresponding pages commonly attract a large number of visitors, many of whom address their questions and comments via e-mail.

Recommended content

- **Biodata** of the current Presiding Officer of the parliament or parliamentary chamber;
- Brief description of the Presiding Officer's **powers and prerogatives**;
- Names of **Deputy-** and/or **Vice-Presidents** (if applicable).

<u>Optional elements</u>

- Presiding Officer's public **agenda** (upcoming meetings, events);
- Collection of the Presiding Officer's important **speeches** and public addresses;
- List of **past Presiding Officers**;
- **Feedback** page or similar mechanism for sending questions and comments to the Presiding Officer.

3.5   MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Citizens show particular interest in the daily work of their parliamentary representatives. The Internet adds greater transparency to this situation, while at the same time enabling individual members of parliament to gain prominence in the public eye.

Accordingly, parliamentary Web site developers should pay special attention to informing the electorate and public at large not only of the legislators' names but also of the scope of the tasks, responsibilities and activities of each individual.

It is a sign of the times that members of Parliament increasingly operate their own Web sites, which serve basically the same purpose but whose content is determined by each member independently. Such sites complement information available on the official Web sites of national parliaments.

<u>Recommended minimum</u>

- Up-to-date **alphabetical list** of all members of Parliament (current legislature) with information about each MP's constituency, party affiliation and membership in parliamentary committees and/or commissions, and with hyperlinks to MPs' personal Web sites (where applicable);
- Similar to the above but with the list of members grouped by **constituency**;
- Similar to the above but with the list of members grouped by **party or political affiliation**;
- **Contact information** for each member of Parliament including his or her e-mail address (where applicable);
- List of **former members of parliament who have resigned from the current legislature or whose membership ceased** for any other reason

<u>Optional elements</u>

- **Biodata** of each member of Parliament;
- Automatically generated index of references to instances of **participation in parliamentary debate** sorted by member's name, date and topic of discussion;
- Public **record of voting** by individual members of parliament (when applicable);
- Basic information concerning the **status of a member of Parliament**, such as parliamentary immunity, inviolability, salaries and allowances, etc.;
- **Alphabetical list** of members of Parliament of the legislature immediately preceding the current one with clearly specified dates.

3.6 PARLIAMENTARY BODIES

A category of information that is particularly difficult to locate other than on the Web sites of national parliaments is that concerning the structure, mandate, composition and work programmes of standing and ad hoc non-plenary bodies such as parliamentary committees, subcommittees and commissions.

While general information about all parliaments is readily available from the PARLINE database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, it is impossible for IPU to keep pace with daily developments in the non-plenary bodies of national parliaments. Nonetheless, such information is in strong demand, as amply demonstrated by the content of feedback messages received through the IPU Web site.
For this reason, it is important for national parliaments to make relevant updated information available on their respective Web sites.

Recommended data

- Complete **list of non-plenary parliamentary bodies** with hyperlinks to separate pages devoted to each body in that category;
- Description of the **mandate and terms of reference** of each parliamentary body;
- **Membership** and names of **presiding officer(s)** of each parliamentary body;
- Information on **current business** and data on upcoming meetings;
- Relevant **contact information** (addresses, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail) of each body;
- Composition and other relevant information concerning the **National IPU Group, parliamentary friendship groups** as well as national **delegations to international and regional parliamentary assemblies** of which the parliament is a member.

Optional data

- **Schedule** of meetings and hearings held by each parliamentary body;
- **Press releases** and other relevant material pertaining to the work of each body;
- Historical data on the **National IPU Group**.

3.7 PUBLICATIONS

Parliaments increasingly offer Internet users the opportunity to order parliamentary publications and informational material directly via the Web site. This feature is especially appreciated by researchers, students and other users who are interested in receiving such documents but live in other countries or geographically remote regions. It should be noted, however, that the operation of a special service for on-line ordering of parliamentary publications and informational material can be costly and have staffing implications.

The availability of on-line order services does not imply that more traditional modes of distribution of parliamentary documents should be discontinued. The mail order system and the parliamentary kiosk remain as relevant as ever, but placing adequate information about parliamentary publications on Web sites may well enhance their dissemination and thus, in the long run, their impact.

Recommended information

- **List of publications and documents** currently available from the Parliament indicating their prices;
- Information on **how this material can be obtained** by traditional means and (where applicable) through the on-line order service.

Option

- Direct **on-line order service** allowing users to select their publications and pay for them with the help of electronic commerce tools;
- Electronic versions of those **publications that can be downloaded from the site** free of charge, for example, in *.PDF format.

4

Interactivity tools
and links with other Web sites

4.1 EXTERNAL HYPERLINKS

Hyperlinks ("clickable" connections to other intra-site documents or to external sites) are the basis of the World Wide Web. Web sites commonly contain multiple hyperlinks to other related sites, the only problem being the need to keep them up to date (the placement of documents on external sites is often subject to change without warning).

Internet users should be able to find their way easily from a national parliament's Web site to those of political parties and government institutions, other countries' parliaments, inter-parliamentary structures, and so on. The actual number and scope of links may vary greatly depending on the degree of presence of State institutions of a given country on the Internet and the ability of the site's Webmaster to keep all links up to date.

It is recommended that external links be grouped either on one page or on several pages by category (e.g. national institutions, state and provincial legislatures, foreign countries, international and regional organisations, etc.).

<u>Recommended links</u>

- Web sites of the country's **Presidency**, **Government**, **Constitutional** and **Supreme Courts** (when applicable);
- Official **Web site of the country** (usually maintained by the Ministry of Tourism or similar governmental services);
- Web site of the **other chamber** in a bicameral parliament (when applicable)
- Web sites of **state/provincial legislatures**;
- **Inter-Parliamentary Union** (http://www.ipu.org for English and http://www.ipu.org/french/home.htm for French);
- Other **international**, **regional** and **sub-regional parliamentary organisations** (a non-exhaustive list can be found at http://www.ipu.org/english/otherweb.htm)
- Web sites of **national political parties**;
- Web sites of **individual members of Parliament** (where applicable).

<u>Optional links</u>

- Web sites of individual **ministries and other national agencies**;
- Web sites of **national parliaments of other countries** (as this information is constantly changing, it might be easier to establish a link with the relevant page at the IPU site: http://www.ipu.org/english/parlweb.htm, which is regularly updated);
- **Global Internet search engines** (such as Yahoo!, Lycos, Alta Vista, Infoseek, etc.);
- **National Internet search engines** (when applicable).

4.2   FEEDBACK AND OTHER INTERACTIVITY TOOLS

Web sites are becoming increasingly interactive. Static content and one-way communication are gradually giving way to more sophisticated Internet tools allowing users to ask questions, send comments, participate in discussion forums and opinion polls, subscribe to news according to personal preferences, buy goods and services on-line, etc.

Interactive Internet technologies already have a visible effect on political practices in many countries, placing legislative institutions at the centre of the public debate on the advent of so-called "electronic democracy", which is likely to change traditional notions of democratic institutions and of citizens as actors.

The very nature of parliaments implies that parliamentary Web sites should be open to interaction with citizens and equipped with the adequate technical means for such communication. However, caution should be exercised in the practical implementation of interactivity mechanisms in order to prevent the Web site from becoming a disruptive factor in the normal functioning of the parliamentary institution.

Recommended tools

- A **feedback utility** that allows users to send their comments and questions directly to the Webmaster by means of forms (i.e. without resorting to e-mail services which might be unavailable in some situations);
- Preconfigured **electronic mail** for sending messages to parliamentary bodies and individual officers directly from the pages of the Web site.

Optional tools

- **Discussion forums** where users can take part in on-line discussions on specific issues, usually related to current debates in the parliament; members of parliament often act as moderators for such forums;
- **Mailing lists** which allow users to subscribe to automatic e-mail delivery of parliamentary information, such as legislative texts;
- Electronic **opinion polls** which allow users to express their views on a given subject through multiple choice questions.

4.3   CONTACT INFORMATION

Available statistical data leave little doubt that one of the main reasons why Internet users visit parliamentary Web sites is to find out how elected representatives or parliamentary bodies can be contacted electronically as well as by traditional means (telephone, fax, mail).

Recommendation

- All sections of the site (from the home page down to pages devoted to individual members of parliament) should contain relevant contact information placed at **visible spots** throughout the site.

5
Usability and design considerations

5.1 LANGUAGES

Textual information on parliamentary Web sites only serves a purpose if visitors are able to read it. Unlike printed media distributed locally, Web pages are more than likely to be visited by people from other parts of the world who do not necessarily speak the site's "native" language. Moreover, for countries with two or more official languages, the choice of a Web site language or languages has political ramifications.

Although it is technically possible to maintain parallel editions of a Web site in as many language versions as necessary, considerations of a practical order (cost of translation, time constraints, staffing needs, etc.) make it difficult to operate multilingual sites. This is especially true of sites with dynamically changing content.

When the creation and maintenance of mirror versions of a given site in each site language pose a problem, the solution may be to have important documents translated into all site languages and leave the rest of the contents in the original language only.

Recommended combination

- For countries with two or more official languages, the entire content of the parliamentary Web site should be available in at least **one of the official languages** of the country;
- A complete or partial version of the site should also exist in **one of the languages of international communication**, usually **English**.

5.2 SEARCH AND INTERNAL NAVIGATION TOOLS

However clear and logical the structure of a given parliamentary Web site may be, it is imperative, due to the relative complexity and abundance of the data it contains, that visitors be provided with tools for easy location of information on the site and quick and orderly navigation. For example, it is advisable to indicate clearly and at a visible spot the date when the site (or an individual page of the site) was last updated.

Naturally, the general rules for effective Web site structuring are applicable (no page should be deeper than three or four levels down from the home page; consistency in the interface and data presentation should be observed; good use should be made of metatags and keywords, etc.).

The following mechanisms and tools are of special relevance in this regard.

<u>Recommended tools</u>

- **Quick search utility** - this standard intra-site search tool is based on automatic indexing of documents and allows free-text search for words and word combinations throughout the site;
- **"What's New"** page - a sort of announcement board with direct hyperlinks to the newest documents on the site;
- **Site map** - textual or graphical visualisation of the site's overall structure containing hyperlinks to individual documents.

<u>Optional tools</u>

- **"Frequently Asked Questions"** page - a traditional Internet method of providing a one-stop place for answers to questions that are asked most frequently;
- **Keyword index** - a special page (usually generated automatically) from which all documents are accessible directly through their respective keywords;
- **Parliamentary staff vacancies** page.

5.3   ADVANCED TECHNICAL FEATURES

Web technology is progressing very quickly and additional features are becoming available with every new generation of server and browser software.

While there is no reason why parliamentary Web sites should not fully benefit from these new and advanced technologies together with the rest of the Internet, a word of caution may be necessary.

Web sites of national parliaments are likely to receive visits from all over the world, including from countries in which the quality of telephone lines is not very high and the speed of Internet connection is correspondingly slow. A surprisingly large proportion of users are still running outdated versions of browser software and thus risk seeing the site in a distorted form unless special measures are taken by the site creators to ensure its compatibility with legacy browser software. Moreover, parliamentary Web sites are likely to be visited by various categories of the general public including visually impaired persons who may have difficulty in reading Web pages designed with the use of frames.

In view of these and other considerations, caution should be exercised in using technically advanced features and heavy and/or animated graphics on parliamentary Web sites.

<u>Recommendations</u>

- In many situations, it is possible to speed up the downloading of long documents (such as legislative acts) if a **text-only version** of the site is available and can be chosen by users at their discretion;
- Document pages, which are likely to be printed out frequently, should preferably not use **frames**;

- New technologies should be used throughout the site in such a way as to ensure **compatibility with legacy browser software**;
- Special **features requiring extensive downloading** - such as virtual tours of parliamentary premises - should remain purely optional and should not hamper the accessibility of other parts of the site;
- Web sites should be adapted to the **needs of visually impaired persons** by making alternative "no-frames" versions of Web pages available as much as possible.

5.4   METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of any parliamentary Web site creation project depends to a great extent upon adequate planning and organisation of work.   Practical experience suggests that the importance of the following tasks should not be underestimated in this regard:

- Ensuring that **political and administrative authorities are fully aware and supportive** of the project;
- Defining the **content of the site** both from the point of view of targeted audience as well as the capacity of information sources to deliver necessary documents;
- Elaborating a detailed **graphical chart of the site**;
- Securing adequate **financial resources**;
- To establish the **site creation team** and ensure its training;
- Finding an appropriate **site-hosting solution**;
- Establishing a clear procedure with regard to **roles and responsibilities in updating the site's content**;
- **Promoting the site** by means of various Internet tools and options.