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**Interparliamentary communication
and computer networks in WEU member countries**

REPORT

submitted on behalf of the Committee for Parliamentary and Public Relations
by Sir Russell Johnston, Rapporteur

*Interparliamentary communication
and computer networks in WEU member countries*

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1. Adopted unanimously by the committee.

2. Members of the Committee: Mr Masseret (Chairman); Sir *Russell Johnston*, Baroness Gould of Potternewton (Vice-Chairmen); Mr de Assis, Mrs Beer, MM *Benvenuti*, Birraux, Decagny, Dionisi (Alternate: *Carcarino*), Sir Anthony Durant (Alternate: Lady *Hooper*), Mr Erler, Mrs Err, Mr Eversdijk, Mrs Fernández Sanz, Mr Ghesquière (Alternate: Mrs *Maximus*), Mr Harmegnies (Alternate: *Valkaniers*), Sir *John Hunt*, MM *Korahais*, Lummer, Mattina, *Micheloyiannis*, Mignon, Mrs van Nieuwenhoven, MM *Niza*, Robles Fraga, Sainz García, *Selva*, Mrs Terborg.

Associate members: Mr *Akcali*, Ms *Aytaman*.

N.B. *The names of those taking part in the vote are printed in italics.*

Draft Resolution

***on interparliamentary communication and computer networks
in WEU member countries***

The Assembly,

- (i) Noting the increasing role information plays in the running of modern-day societies;
- (ii) Uneasy about the risks of data manipulation and disinformation that can arise from uncontrolled development of new methods of mass communication;
- (iii) Concerned that the lack of information about WEU and its Assembly leads to misunderstanding of their role and place in the European security architecture, as evidenced in the discussions preparatory to the IGC and the confusion that reigns over the modified Brussels Treaty in relation to the 1998 time frame;
- (iv) Acknowledging the ever increasing importance of information technology, and in particular the Internet, in national, regional and international communications;
- (v) Stressing the need for national and European parliamentary institutions to adjust to the new working methods involved and master their use;
- (vi) Noting with satisfaction efforts national parliaments are making to computerise parliamentary work and thus improve the flow of information to members and between parliaments and other European institutions;
- (vii) Desirous of close cooperation between the Assembly, national parliaments and other relevant institutions for the purpose of securing their presence on the Internet and using it to establish a European-wide computerised data network incorporating security and defence matters;
- (viii) Stressing the importance of WEU associate members and observers being closely associated in this process, together with the central European countries that are candidates for accession to the European Union and NATO, and of cooperating in this field with Russia and Ukraine,

INVITES THE PARLIAMENTS OF MEMBER, ASSOCIATE MEMBER, OBSERVER AND ASSOCIATE PARTNER COUNTRIES

1. To encourage information exchange between parliaments by means of electronic communication systems and the Internet;
2. To participate actively, in appropriate ways including legislation, in developing and setting up such systems, all the while ensuring that the process remains within their control, so as to safeguard parliamentary democracy from abuses, such as the manipulation of data, to which development in a purely technological sense might give rise;
3. To encourage debate within their confines and between parliaments on the role of computer technology and the Internet in modern societies, paying particular attention to the political and social aspects of this issue, especially in relation to the education of future generations;
4. To cooperate with one another and with the WEU Assembly and other European and Euro-Atlantic parliamentary institutions in order to establish a European parliamentary network incorporating security and defence matters.

Draft Order***on interparliamentary communication and computer networks
in WEU member countries***

The Assembly,

- (i) Noting the growing use of the Internet and electronic communication systems for data transmission and exchange;
- (ii) Concerned that the lack of information about WEU and its Assembly leads to misunderstanding of their role and place in the European security architecture, as evidenced in the discussions preparatory to the IGC and the confusion that reigns over the modified Brussels Treaty in relation to the 1998 time frame;
- (iii) Stressing the widespread dissemination of information that can be achieved at low cost as compared with traditional means such as postal, messenger, telephone and telecommunications services;
- (iv) Recognising the advantages that can be derived, in terms of the Assembly's image and an awareness of its role on the part of other institutions and the general public, from a permanent presence on the Internet via the World Wide Web;
- (v) Stressing the need for the Assembly to have the appropriate means for achieving such a presence, in cooperation with national parliaments and other relevant institutions,

I. INSTRUCTS ITS PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE

To give its views on whether it would be timely and on such means as might be employed to circulate committee working papers and correspondence between the Assembly, its committees and the national delegations via electronic mail or in other computerised format;

II. REQUESTS ITS COMMITTEE ON BUDGETARY AFFAIRS AND ADMINISTRATION

To envisage providing the Assembly with the means to develop its own computer network, secure a presence on the Internet and use it in the course of its work.

Explanatory Memorandum

(submitted by Sir Russell Johnston, Rapporteur)

I. Introduction

1. Worldwide development and expansion of new technologies for information transmission and public and private communications are having a major political, economic and social impact on contemporary societies. There are many positive sides to this development, however its unpredictable and uncontrolled aspects are also giving rise to reservations and concern on the part of decision-makers at national and international level. The latter include elected parliaments, apprehensive, with some justification, about the emergence of new forms of political expression that could call the foundations of modern parliamentary democracy into question. Their fears are substantiated by the opportunities for disinformation and manipulation of public opinion the use of increasingly sophisticated technologies has opened up, through a process where reality blends with virtuality, beyond the reach of any form of national or international control.

2. The worldwide scale of the Internet serves as an obvious illustration of this aspect of the problem. A communications tool which constitutes the ultimate in decentralisation, this "network of networks" is an awesome instrument whose potential for the dissemination and exchange of information and ideas has not yet been fully explored. It encompasses all the areas of activity in which modern societies are engaged – trade and finance, education and training, political and social matters – in an ongoing process of expansion, unfettered other than by the limits placed upon it by network users and servers, ranging from the man in the street to governments and major multinational corporations. Even though the greater part of humanity is not yet "on the Net" – in other words cannot access it directly or indirectly – the entire world is represented there, down to the remotest communities of our modern-day societies.

3. Another factor in the debate is the Internet's growing role as a junction and interchange for communications between states, international organisations and all types of institutions, including parliaments. Use of electronic mail, or E-mail as it is known, is now widespread and the number of addresses continues to grow apace, making information exchange possible at costs and speeds bearing no relation to those of traditional methods. E-mail also has the advantage of increasingly sophisticated data protec-

tion methods. The "hypertext" system and World Wide Web architecture ("Web" for short) allow servers (suppliers of access, data or services) and users all over the world, ranging from mere individuals to a wide variety of institutions, to be connected to one another. Another major consideration is that communication via the Internet is possible both within and outside a given country, irrespective of the prevailing political situation or the state of telecommunications systems.

4. These are some of the factors that have made the Internet an essential communications tool – one that can justifiably be regarded as ushering in a society where information has an increasingly important part to play and which is becoming a major strategic issue. This is a fact which the United States, a pioneering nation – albeit not the only one – in this field has been quick to take on board, and which explains its presence at every level, governmental and private, of the Internet. European countries are reluctantly becoming involved. Not having yet given thought to considerations affecting areas other than industry and technology, they tend essentially to concentrate on minor, more marginal aspects such as, for example, abuse of freedom of expression, rather than on the myriad potential offered by a communications tool of this nature.

5. Dealing with such issues is a complicated task since the Internet not only has implications for communications but also in the political, economic and defence spheres, any one area of which might provide the subject matter of reports which are more the province of the Assembly's Technological and Aerospace and Defence Committees. The present report from the Committee for Parliamentary and Public Relations proposes to deal briefly but comprehensively, with how the Internet works and some of the major issues it raises, including that of the future of interparliamentary communication, a subject of central concern to the WEU Assembly. Far from this being a simple matter of compiling the addresses of servers located in the various parliaments, the issue to be raised and addressed is that of the expediency at the present time of setting up an interparliamentary network linking the assemblies of the WEU member countries and those of countries associated in various ways with WEU, to which European and transatlantic political, economic and defence organisations might also be connected.

II. The Internet today

6. This report aims to deal with three basic questions: What is the Internet? How does it work and what practical interest does it have for national parliaments and the Assembly and, lastly, what advantages can it offer these institutions? Other aspects of the Internet – for example the security of the network and its cultural and political impact – should also be considered and will be discussed here in a parliamentary context.

1. Internet: theory and practice of the network of networks

7. The word Internet comes from the concept of “inter-networking” developed in the 1960s and 70s by American communications and computer researchers and specialists working in the civilian and military sectors and carrying out research into the question of the survival of command centres in the United States in the event of generalised nuclear war. The solution proposed was the creation of a totally decentralised communications system using existing infrastructure (in particular telephone lines). This network would provide a link between various governmental and private institutions (federal government departments, universities, scientific research centres) and remain operational even if some of its components were destroyed. The resultant system was an open one requiring only a computer, a modem (modulator – demodulator) and a telephone line to link into it. Information could be sent via the modem in binary form (machine language) through the telephone network.

8. Designed for military use, the system rapidly became very popular in university circles for information exchange of all types, principally via electronic or E-mail, each network user having a specific address which was the computer equivalent of a normal postal address. Moreover, unlike the telephone, user costs were based not on the distance and length of a call but on a flat rate and the availability of two-way communications access lines, in other words the line giving a user access to an Internet site is the same as that used to access other parts of the network from that site. At the same time, developments in computer hardware and software made it possible to transmit all types of data in the form of text, images and sound.

9. These technical developments attracted commercial interest that did not exist when the network was created. Companies were formed offering computer information services based on Internet principles. For a flat-rate subscription fee, any public or private user can access databanks made available by the service provider, electronic mail facilities (where the service provider acts as a post box – receiving and forwarding messages) and many other services (information, image and sound archives, on- or off-line debates,

etc.) – all for the cost of a local telephone call, with the service provider making its profit partly from subscription charges, partly from renting access lines and advertising space to companies and institutions seeking to expand their customer base or target audience. Some of these companies such as CompuServe and America on Line, which are American in origin, are now active in Europe.

10. At the same time other services have been created for accessing the Internet. Here the user himself searches world-wide for information of interest to him or exchanges mail with correspondents by direct Internet access through the server, using specialised software (supplied free on subscription) for each type of operation desired. These include:

- (i) electronic mail (E-mail) for sending and receiving all forms of mail (text, images, sound and computer programs);
- (ii) file transfer (using FTP – file transfer protocol) whereby data in any form can be retrieved from or transferred to other computers (but not amended by the remote user);
- (iii) connection to and use of a specific remote computer (Telnet), either for information exchange (including interactive dialogue) or to make use of the other machine and its capabilities for specific operations (carrying out complex calculations on more powerful machines: inputting, amending and deleting information). To use Telnet, computers initiating calls must have correspondents' personal addresses and, as necessary, the codes giving access to their files and functions;
- (iv) discussions on all kinds of subjects (newsgroups) are an interesting feature of the Internet which is a sort of international forum (essentially American dominated) in which participants can share their views and receive and exchange data (text, images, sound, programs). There are now specialist newsgroups for particular countries or languages (in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and others) and subject headings – society, computing, politics, social issues, economics and so on.
- (v) information or file searches using software that locates the data users are looking for on the Internet by the use of key words. The software connects with the user's chosen server centre and asks it for the address at which the files that are required can be found. If there are no “hits”, connection is

made with another server, and so on. Files can be downloaded using FTP (file transfer protocol);

- (vi) the various software packages that provide access to the World Wide Web are now essential and, arguably, the most important tools for making good use of the Internet. The word Web simply describes the network architecture which is made up of thousands of permanently interconnected computers all over the world (major institutions, public and private service and access providers). The Web has rapidly come to represent the Internet itself. Through a combined text and image and now, at certain sites, sound interface, Internet users at every level have a "visitor's pass", a promotional tool, unparalleled in any other modern medium (enabling information to be circulated to millions of people in nearly every country in the world) or alternatively just a very practical and "fun" way of searching for information, making purchases, sending messages (for example by E-mail), loading files, etc.. It is possible to carry out the operations described above on the Web (mail, file transfer, searches, Telnet, newsgroups) using a single software program (which can be loaded directly at no cost). It is of tremendous propaganda, information and advertising interest, as the ever increasing number of public and private institutions, not to mention individuals who have taken display pages on the Web goes to show: the WEU Assembly, NATO, the United States, United Kingdom and other governments, the French Senate and other national parliaments, major American and European companies, Greenpeace, universities – to mention but a few examples of what can be found in the Web pages. The Web also has the facility, starting from any one of its pages, to connect up the various Internet sites the user accesses without the need to provide addresses. (It is possible to move from the NATO page to that of the WEU Assembly and thence to that of the French Senate and so on). However the major innovation of the Web and the area that holds most promise in terms of its development over the next few years, is its use in all types of commercial and financial transactions – a most important factor in a world that is increasingly dominated by the influence of the financial markets.

11. As a result of developments in computer technologies, the Internet has in a sense become an international institution, at least as far as the major industrial countries are concerned. An immense library, a forum for talk and discussion, an instrument for commercial and financial transactions used by public and private institutions alike and even the ordinary man or woman – the Internet is all of these things. Its ubiquitousness and sustained expansion (the number of individuals and institutions getting connected and the amount of information available continues to increase) coupled with the absence of legislation at international level, the difficulty of controlling the flow of information and monitoring its content, the predominance of the English, or rather the American, language and the overwhelming presence of the United States (at every level, institutional and private alike) amount to a challenge which has so far elicited only a timid response from Europe, which for the time being has no overall view of how it might use the Internet to enhance the status of its community of nation states as a political and economic power. No mere technological innovation, the Internet is already virtually an independent player in international relations, a factor which has political, economic and cultural implications.

2. The issues raised by the Internet

12. The use of the Web for financial transactions has contributed substantially to the development of software to make data exchange secure from adulteration by third parties seeking to intercept or amend information transmitted via the network. Such programs are very common today, but owing to a lack of coordination between states, the conditions governing their use are shrouded in international legal uncertainty. The root of the problem is that the use of data protection methods, which frequently rely on encryption techniques, is not the exclusive prerogative of the financial sector; such methods can also be used to protect all kinds of data circulating on the network including illegal data (emanating from terrorist groups or relating, for example, to trafficking in drugs or arms).

13. However there is little point in making an issue of security without taking account of the content of the information available on the Internet which, by and large, is unclassified, since the interest of its being on the Net is precisely its accessibility to the greatest number of users possible. Abuse undoubtedly does occur but involves only a tiny segment of daily traffic. Users and service providers operating on the Internet are able to restrict access to their data by means of passwords or subscription charges to identify those connected. Use of Telnet is open to greatest abuse but even here it is necessary to have a computer

address and in many cases the password that protects it. This presupposes a level of technical competence in computing which not all users are able to command. With the Web, protection applies essentially to commercial transactions (relaying credit card numbers for example).

14. The security issue is not especially meaningful in relation to parliaments' presence on the Internet, except when Telnet is used, as it can give access to sensitive data that can be copied or amended. However these forms of adulteration often leave a trace allowing the intrusion to be detected. Electronic mail is useful for sending all kinds of information and in this connection it is worth pointing out that the Italian Senate Delegation used E-mail to send the secretariat of this Committee information on computerisation of the Senate's services. It is also possible to send a short E-mail message to which files of tens or even hundreds of pages are attached. When the mail is received, these files simply need to be opened using the appropriate software (data processing, image and sound retrieval, including video) and processed according to their intended use (browsing, printing, amending).

15. For example, within the Committee, working papers might be sent by E-mail or file transfer to committee members who have access to the Internet through their parliaments; they would amend or make suggestions about the text and send it back to the Rapporteur who would revise it and send it back to the members once more for an opinion. This could already be done and a very quick turn-around achieved, without wasting too much paper (the document could be printed out if necessary) and without incurring postal or courier charges – all for the cost of a local telephone call. Electronic mail is not one hundred per cent secure but is still a very safe way of exchanging information and one that is not affected by the practical constraints governing traditional postal services (strikes, transport difficulties, the time factor, etc.). Security could be guaranteed by using the encoding systems already widely available on the Internet, or provided by parliaments' technical services.

16. Use of the Web by parliaments does not raise particular security problems as the information which is to be circulated falls largely within the public domain. The Web is the ideal means of presenting the work of assemblies to a huge audience and at the same time readers (i.e. of Web pages) are able to submit suggestions and comments; in this way the voting public can make representations to its members and senators. This aspect of the relationship between ordinary members of the public and their elected representatives is still in its infancy in Europe, but is becoming normal practice in the United States, essentially because of the peculiarities of the American politi-

cal party system (the Democratic and Republican Parties have only small memberships, hence the need to appeal directly to the electorate outside the traditional party political structures). Since the election of President Clinton, the Republican Party has established a highly active presence on the Internet (Web and newsgroups) and also within the CompuServe and America on Line networks. This political dimension is no doubt set to develop further in years to come with the increase in the number of connections to the network and perhaps foreshadows the dawn of a cyberdemocracy of a somewhat alarming nature as it would be the exclusive province of those having access to such forms of modern communications.

17. Here we come to one of the least discussed but nonetheless important aspects of the Internet. Although technically speaking the Internet covers the entire globe, it is closed to the vast majority of the world's inhabitants on account of their not having access to a telephone network. In our own societies, most people, including the decision-makers, are subject to constant media bombardment on the Net – such are the advantages and disadvantages of the system – but are still unaware of what the Internet actually is and the uses that can be made of it. The Internet remains confined to an elite that is largely urban, academic and technocratic and the recruitment ground for most of society's decision-makers. The Internet's democratic potential cannot be fulfilled until the majority of the population have access to it, not simply for shopping, but for putting forward ideas, stimulating discussion on choices in society and entering into a dialogue with their elected representatives. This implies schools making an effort to teach pupils how to use the Internet in an active and critical way. This is a debate in which parliamentarians who vote education budgets can play a part.

18. Nowadays, in spite of the large number of permanent connections (estimated at 20-30 million worldwide, the vast majority, however, being in the United States) the Internet fails to reflect international cultural and linguistic diversity. This situation is not one that has been engineered deliberately but is simply the logical consequence of the circumstances described in the previous paragraph. English has become the "official" language on the Internet because it is the main language used to communicate in the environments in which the system developed initially in the United States and thereafter in Europe (namely, universities and large multinational companies). Language is but one illustration of the as yet elitist nature of the Internet. Internet sites are at present being created where French, German or Spanish is used – and the list is not exhaustive. However for these languages to be able to be represented, the network should be extended as widely as possible to speakers of French, German and other languages. The

predominance of the English or rather American language simply reflects the larger number of English-speaking users as compared with other language groups. Since language is a vehicle for cultural values, it is hardly surprising that an Anglo-Saxon view of the world – deriving from sources which include CNN, the major American newspapers and radio stations – permeates the network. Only a wide-ranging campaign mounted by national governments in the framework of wider European cooperation (not confined to the European Union) can ensure that Europe has a strong presence on the Internet that adequately reflects its values and cultural diversity.

19. This is a political not a technical matter, and one to which parliaments can respond. In Europe the debate at present revolves essentially around the technological, industrial and commercial spin-offs from the use of the Internet and, in general terms, around the future of telecommunications, when the real issue is the content of the information available on the Internet. Here too, there is a tendency to home in on marginal albeit more sensational aspects for today's media (neo-Nazi or Islamic fundamentalist sites for example); it would be interesting however to learn why, when a search is carried out, say, on a European writer, the Italian military aeronautics industry or agriculture in Spain, most of the information is found at sites in the United States – and hence in American English – when it might be expected to be stored at major European universities or museums, in Italy or Spain, in the languages of the countries concerned – possibly with an English translation. The example quoted is not a hypothetical one but the outcome of a practical exercise actually conducted and easily verifiable by accessing the Internet. Information and sites which are undoubtedly illegal do exist, but there are also laws for punishing abuse, including the abuse of computerised networks. This is an area in which parliaments have considerable freedom of intervention and should avoid allowing themselves to be distracted from the essential issues by the technical arguments that surround the debate on the subject.

20. Technology is constantly evolving; governments, parliaments, the major social and economic players and others take advantage of it as part of the normal development of our modern-day societies. The central issue in the Internet debate is, specifically, the use that is to be made of the network, the content of the information available on it, the values that are transmitted via its agency and the political and economic image of the world which predominates on the Internet. The network, which is still evolving, has today become an essential communications and information tool; parliaments are aware of the fact and already use it in their work and for publicising their activities throughout the world. They also have a responsi-

bility, through a concerted effort in Europe and in conjunction with American legislators, to make the Internet more accessible to the public and more culturally diverse – by encouraging the teaching in schools of the skills necessary to promote its use – and hence more democratic as a vehicle for conveying values and as a worldwide forum for the discussion of ideas, open to the greatest possible number of the world's inhabitants.

III. Interparliamentary communications

21. The Maastricht Treaty, the preparation of the intergovernmental conference and the move towards a single currency have, despite uncertainty and a lack of clarity on the part of European political actors, contributed to accelerating the process of European integration. At the same time the phenomenon of globalisation and growing economic interdependence means that the future of European political and economic systems is a consideration which must inevitably be addressed. The rapid transmission of information and its dissemination are becoming instruments of power in their own right, shared for the time being among relatively few states, with the United States foremost among them. In this area, European Union countries are acting in disorganised fashion, notwithstanding reports and research, for the most part describing a reality of which they have no more grasp than they have suggestions as to the course they should follow, or any real, demonstrable political intention of translating aspirations voiced in this connection into hard facts.

22. This is an area where national parliaments are still conspicuous by their absence from the European debate, not yet having been able to establish European-wide cooperation such as exists between governments. Constraints imposed by internal policies and widely differing electoral systems make coordination of parliamentary initiatives difficult. This consolidates governments' freedom of action while elected assemblies are subsequently called upon to ratify decisions and commitments that are not necessarily clear, or popular with the electorate, and whose consequences are not always beneficial in terms of the future of parliamentary democracies (disenchantment with traditional political classes, strengthening of nationalist and populist sentiments, distrust of Europe and its institutions, including in foreign and security policy matters).

23. Parliamentary cooperation does of course exist and has been on the increase for many years in multi- and bilateral frameworks and in European and transatlantic institutions (the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the WEU Assembly, the OSCE Assembly and the North Atlantic Assembly) but it does not yet constitute a real political component of the pro-