

Online publication and the accessibility of parliamentary information

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Abstract: Parliaments are increasingly publishing parliamentary papers and information online, enabling them to provide information that is up-to-date, easy to search, available to anyone with an internet connection, and accessibly presented. This provides an opportunity to increase transparency around how Houses spend their time on sitting days, and what information members are provided with in the form of tabled papers and returns to orders for documents. It also increases the accessibility of parliamentary information to all members of the public, regardless of their location, ability to access the parliamentary precinct, or civics knowledge. To capitalise on these opportunities, parliaments should explore ways to make the information they publish online easier to find and understand, and consider making more documents and information publicly available online. This paper will discuss various topical options for improving access to parliamentary information, including artificial intelligence (AI) and web application programming interfaces (APIs: websites which publish selected data for use by web developers).

¹ Senior Council Officer, Legislative Council, Parliament of New South Wales. The views in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the New South Wales Legislative Council or its members. The author thanks current and former staff of the Legislative Council who reviewed and provided advice on this paper, including Madeleine Dowd, Christine Thai, Allison Stowe, Sharon Ohnesorge, Stephen Frappell, Steven Reynolds, and David Blunt. This paper was presented to the 2025 Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) Annual Conference in Adelaide, 1-3 October 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Public institutions are increasingly using online publication to share information, provide services, and increase transparency.² This article explores this trend through examples and practices drawn from the Legislative Council, or upper house, of the bicameral Parliament of New South Wales. The examines how the publication of the New South Wales Legislative Council's papers has changed over its history, and the benefits and opportunities provided by the progressive adoption of online publication. The positive impact of online publication on the accessibility of parliamentary information to the public – particularly cohorts who experience greater barriers when accessing physical parliamentary papers, such as those who live in remote locations, who experience disability, and who have a low level of civics knowledge – is explored. The article concludes by discussing new technological options for increasing the accessibility of parliamentary information and documents published online.

DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLICATION PRACTICES FOR NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PAPERS

Before exploring the ways in which parliaments might embrace technology to improve transparency in the information they publish, it is helpful to briefly describe some key historical milestones in the publication of New South Wales Legislative Council papers. The New South Wales Legislative Council has produced and stored many documents during its 200-year history, and the way each document is published depends on its type and age.

House Papers

The House Papers is the collective name for the Minutes of Proceedings, Notice Paper, and the Questions and Answers Paper. These documents are produced by the Procedure Office and together provide a comprehensive record of the matters considered and actions of the House each sitting day.

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

The Minutes of Proceedings are the official record of the proceedings in the House on each sitting day, and have been published as a bound journal at the end of each Parliament since

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2023). *Effective Government Information Websites: Toolkit for Implementation*. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/effective-government-information-websites_ac325b03-en/full-report.html, p. 3

1856.³ The Minutes began to be published online in 1991; however, subsequently all earlier Minutes, including those published between 1824 and the beginning of the collation of bound journals in 1856, have been digitised, so the full set may be viewed online.⁴

NOTICE PAPER

The Notice Paper lists notices of motion and orders of the day which have not yet been disposed of, along with the name of the member with carriage of the item.⁵ The Notice Paper for each sitting day is published online at the conclusion of the previous sitting day. Prior to 1991, the details of notices of motions and orders of the day were included and published as part of the Minutes. The Notice Paper has been published online since it became a standalone document in 1991. At the end of each parliamentary session between February 1990 and December 2010, a bound journal of all Notice Papers produced during the session was published.⁶

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS PAPER

The Questions and Answers Paper lists questions on notice asked to ministers and the answers provided. The Paper is published online every business day; prior to 2019, it was published only on sitting days as questions could not be asked on other days. Until August 1984, this information was contained within the Minutes of Proceedings, and from then, when the Questions and Answers Paper began to be produced as a standalone document, until December 2010, a bound journal was published at the end of each session which collated each Paper published during the session.⁷ Questions and Answers Papers published since 1991 are available online. In addition to the Questions and Answers Paper, questions and answers given since 1988 may be viewed on the Parliament's website, searchable by asking member, portfolio, date asked, date answer due, and by portfolio then by date answer due.

TABLED PAPERS

Tabled papers are documents which are presented to the House, usually by ministers, the President, or the Clerk. Annual reports of government departments, statutory reports,

³ Stephen Frappell and David Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*. Sydney: The Federation Press, 2021, p. 408.

⁴ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 408.

⁵ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 410.

⁶ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 413.

⁷ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 413.

committee reports, petitions, government responses to committee reports and petitions, and returns to orders for papers are all common types of tabled papers. Papers tabled by ministers, the President, or the Clerk, and committee reports tabled by the committee chair are automatically published, and assist the House in staying informed of the actions of the government and its departments. Private members may table documents with the consent of all members in the House; these documents are available for inspection by members only unless the House resolves to publish them. Regardless of whether they are authorised to be published or not, the original hard copy of each tabled paper must be retained in the custody of the Clerk.⁸ Accordingly, the Legislative Council holds a hard copy of every document tabled since 1856.

The Journals of the Legislative Council contain an index of all papers tabled in the Council in each parliamentary session.⁹ Tabled papers ordered to be printed between 1856 and 1904 were printed in the Journals of the Legislative Council. From 1904 to 2006, tabled papers ordered to be printed were instead printed in a separate publication, the Joint Volumes of Parliamentary Papers. In 2006, the Joint Volumes of Parliamentary Papers, which had become largely redundant as reports and documents were increasingly being published online, ceased to be printed.

The digitisation of the Legislative Council's tabled papers has occurred in stages and is not yet complete. In 2017, papers tabled between 1824 and May 1856 were published on the parliament's website.¹⁰ Papers tabled between May 1856 and August 1901 were authorised to be published in late 2021¹¹ and those tabled between September 1901 and April 1938 were authorised to be published in mid-2023.¹² Tabled papers that have been authorised to be published but are not available online may be viewed by members of the public in hard copy at the Parliament of New South Wales or the State Records Authority, depending on the location of the document.

⁸ Susan Want and Jenelle Moore, Edited by David Blunt, *Annotated Standing Orders of the New South Wales Legislative Council*. Sydney: The Federation Press, 2018, p. 156.

⁹ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 657.

¹⁰ New South Wales, Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Council, 30 March 2017, p. 1.

¹¹ *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 17 November 2021, p. 2738.

¹² *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 24 May 2023, pp. 108-109.

RETURNS TO ORDERS FOR PAPERS

The sheer volume of documents returned in response to orders for papers and the public interest in viewing them distinguish returns to orders, which are only provided in hard copy, from other types of tabled documents.

The power of the New South Wales Legislative Council to order the production of government papers, which is derived from the common law principle of reasonable necessity – that is, that the power to order documents is reasonably necessary to allow the House to carry out its scrutiny function – is expressed and has its administrative process prescribed by standing order 52. The 'reasonable necessity' of the House's power to order documents was confirmed by the 1996 decision of the New South Wales Court of Appeal in *Egan v Willis and Cahill*¹³ and the 1998 decision of the High Court in *Egan v Willis*.¹⁴

Perhaps because the power of the Council has been so confirmed, in addition to the fact that the government has not enjoyed a majority in the Council since 1988,¹⁵ the power to order the production of documents has been well-exercised in recent Parliaments. During the 57th Parliament, which occurred between May 2019 and March 2023, 447 orders for papers were agreed to, with an average of approximately 6.4 boxes of documents returned in response to each order. During the first couple of years of the 58th Parliament, from May 2023 until June 2025, 123 orders were agreed to, with an average of approximately 14 boxes of documents returned per order. Each return is accompanied by an index showing all documents returned, which is scanned and published online as a searchable PDF to assist stakeholders in identifying and locating documents of interest.

Many of the documents returned in response to orders for papers are of considerable interest, not just to the member who ordered them, but also to the media and members of the public. Some documents returned attract a claim of privilege which restricts anyone but current members of the Legislative Council from viewing them; members may view, but not copy, distribute, or publicly refer to the information within privileged documents.¹⁶ Non-privileged (public) documents may be viewed, copied, and quoted by anyone, although anyone distributing or quoting from the documents would not be protected by parliamentary privilege.

¹³ [1996] 40 NSWLR 650.

¹⁴ [1998] HCA 71.

¹⁵ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Frappell and Blunt (editors), *New South Wales Legislative Council Practice: Second Edition*, p. 669.

The volume of hard-copy documents returned in response to orders for papers, and the public interest in and utility of them, makes facilitating access to the non-privileged documents a logistical challenge for the Procedure Office, which manages them. Stakeholders must attend the Parliament to view returns, and may be limited to bookings of two hours. A high-speed scanner allows stakeholders to make searchable scans of any documents of use to them. Even so, those interested in large returns often need to make multiple bookings in order to scan all documents returned.

OPPORTUNITIES AFFORDED TO PARLIAMENTS BY ONLINE PUBLICATION

Public access to parliamentary House papers and tabled papers increases the transparency of the legislative process and government decisions. Online publication of parliamentary documents can improve public access by increasing the speed with which information is published, the flexibility to present information in a user-friendly way, and the ease with which information may be located.

Ease and speed of publishing information

Gone are the days when one had to wait until the end of a parliamentary session for a comprehensive record of a House's actions and papers to be published. With an information management system and a public website, parliamentary documents and information can be published online at the click of a button, within hours or even seconds of being finalised or ordered to be published.

As social media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, rhetoric, and misinformation,¹⁷ the ability for parliaments to quickly publish official records such as the Minutes of Proceedings or Hansard becomes more important. Timely publication of parliamentary records allows members of the public to fact-check and research, and decreases their reliance on social media commentators, who may or may not be unbiased and well-informed, to be informed of recent parliamentary happenings.

¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2022). *Global Parliamentary Report 2022 - Public engagement in the work of parliament*. Accessed at: <https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament>, p. 23; Patrick Theiner, Julia Schwanholz, Andreas Busch. (2017). *Parliaments 2.0? Digital media use by national parliaments in the EU*. In *Managing Democracy in the Digital Age: Internet Regulation, Social Media Use, and Online Civic Engagement* (pp. 77-95). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Flexibility in how information is presented

Parliamentary environments are rich in specialised terminology, procedures and concepts arising from centuries of precedent and tradition. Parliamentary officers have historically proven fairly conservative innovators who have not rushed to modernise the language their Houses use. House Papers, especially – the Minutes of Proceedings and Notice Paper – generally use language and structure which are quite inflexibly constrained by precedent. While members, staffers, and parliamentary officers become acclimatised to these peculiarities, parliamentary newcomers and members of the public may be intimidated and confounded by archaic language ('to be called on forthwith?'), novel concepts ('formal business?'), and familiar terms with unfamiliar meanings (a 'bill' is not a request for payment or a form of physical currency?).

Given the lack of flexibility in official House documents, parliamentary websites provide an opportunity for parliamentary information to be presented in a way that prioritises accessibility and ease of understanding, rather than compliance with the standing orders and tradition.

Ease of locating information

Parliaments generally produce and collect troves of documents. The voluminous House Papers produced every sitting day and requirement to keep a copy of every annual report, bill, petition, or other document ever tabled in the House, and every document produced in response to an order for papers, means that most parliaments are swimming in seas of pages and information kept for posterity.

But how much does posterity benefit from this treasure trove? How can parliaments advertise the wealth of documents they hold? How can they help the public identify and access the information of use or interest to them? Online publication holds a partial answer to all these questions.

Search engines are a key research tool in the modern age. 91% of Australians accessed news and information online in the first six months of 2024,¹⁸ and the average internet user conducts

¹⁸ Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Communications and Media Authority). (2022). *Communications and media in Australia: How we use the internet*. <https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-12/How%20we%20use%20the%20internet%20-%20Executive%20summary%20and%20key%20findings.pdf>, p. 5.

over eight search engine searches each day.¹⁹ Search engines work by 'crawling' the internet to find new or updated webpages and then, if the webpage allows it and contains sufficiently useful and novel information, indexing the webpage so it can be returned as a search result if a relevant search term is used.²⁰ If parliaments publish their documents, or the metadata of their documents (that is, information about the document itself, such as its tabling date), online, the webpages about the documents may be returned as search engine results, allowing members of the public to become aware of relevant documents the parliament holds. PDFs can be indexed by search engines and returned in search results,²¹ so if PDFs of parliamentary documents are uploaded with searchable text, search engines are able to return the PDFs in results, if their content includes relevant searched terms.

Online publication gives parliaments the opportunity to make parliamentary documents easy to locate from their parliamentary websites by implementing user-friendly searching and filtering tools. If parliamentary documents are published online with searchable text, users will be able to find the parts of a document relevant to them even more efficiently. Compared to members of the public needing to trawl through physical bills registers or boxes of documents to search for useful information, online publication allows for a significant increase in the utility of the vast quantities of documents parliaments are required to retain.

Case study: Register of Disclosures by Members of the Legislative Council

The evolution of the New South Wales Register of Disclosures by Members of the Legislative Council highlights how online publication can increase the accessibility and searchability of information.

Members of the New South Wales Legislative Council have been required to lodge returns disclosing their pecuniary and other interests since the making of the *Constitution (Disclosures by Members) Regulation 1983*. The Clerk compiles the returns into the Register of Disclosures by Members of the Legislative Council, which is tabled in the House and can be viewed by the public.

¹⁹ Aleksandra Urman and Mykola Makhortykh, 'You are how (and where) you search? Comparative analysis of web search behavior using web tracking data'. *J Comput Soc Sci* 6(2) 2023, pp 741-756. Accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-023-00208-9>.

²⁰ Google. (2025, March 6). *In-depth guide to how Google Search works*. <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/how-search-works>

²¹ Google. (2025, February 4). *File types indexable by Google*. <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/indexable-file-types>

According to the Regulation, members of the public may view the Register in the Office of the Clerk 'between the hours of 10.00 am and 4 pm on any day except Saturday, Sunday or a day which is a public holiday throughout New South Wales.'²²

Since 2019, the Register has been published twice annually on the Parliament's website, on the Tabled Papers webpage, as a searchable PDF. This allows members of the public to access the information at the time and location of their choosing and allows them to more easily search the information; however, the difficulty involved in locating the register on the Tabled Papers webpage, the large number of pages in each register and the fact that many members handwrite their disclosures (handwriting cannot be parsed and made searchable) mean that finding specific information can still be time-consuming.

Since the passage of the *Integrity Legislation Amendment Bill 2022* in late 2022, any new regulation must include a requirement for the register to be kept in a publicly searchable electronic format.²³ The publication of disclosures data in an electronic, searchable register is likely to greatly increase the ease with which members of the public will be able to search for and locate specific information.

Social impact of online publication

The growing adoption of online services, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, means online accessibility has become increasingly necessary to allow individuals to fully participate in society.²⁴ Similarly, having an online presence and offering online services has become important for the relevance and credibility of institutions and businesses.²⁵ Both the New

²² *Constitution (Disclosures by Members) Regulation 1983* (NSW) reg 20(1)

²³ Privileges Committee, NSW Legislative Council, *Draft Constitution (Disclosures by Members) Regulation 2024* (2024). Accessed at: [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/3030/Report%2096%20-%20Draft%20Constitution%20\(Disclosures%20by%20Members\)%20Regulation%20Report.pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/3030/Report%2096%20-%20Draft%20Constitution%20(Disclosures%20by%20Members)%20Regulation%20Report.pdf), p. 3.

²⁴ Fernando H. F. Botelho, 'Accessibility to digital technology: Virtual barriers, real opportunities'. *Assistive Technology* 33 2021, pp. 27-34. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400435.2021.1945705>; Fotis Fitsilis. 'A Paradigm Shift for Parliaments'. *International Journal of Parliamentary Studies* 3(1) 2023, 1-4. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/26668912-bja10063>.

²⁵ Anne Marie Warren, Ainin Sulaiman and Noor Ismawati Jaafar, 'Social media effects on fostering online civic engagement and building citizen trust and trust in institutions'. *Government Information Quarterly* 31(2) 2014, pp. 291-301. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2013.11.007>; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2023). *Effective Government Information Websites: Toolkit for Implementation*. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/effective-government-information-websites_ac325b03-en/full-report.html, p. 3.

South Wales and Commonwealth governments have strategies to increase digital inclusion, recognising that the provision of accessible government services and information online is crucial to enabling service delivery and civic participation in the digital age.²⁶

The importance of online resources in providing consistent access to information and services was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical services faced closures or capacity limits, but online services continued uninterrupted.²⁷ Even before the pandemic, students were increasingly drawn to online methods of research over print resources,²⁸ demonstrating a growing need for online publication to keep parliamentary information locatable with modern research methods.

Geographical location

If parliamentary documents can only be viewed in hard copy at the parliament, ease of access is highly dependent on an individual's proximity to the parliamentary precinct. Proximity cannot be assumed: in most Australian states, the distance from the state capital to the most remote part of the state is over 400 kilometres; in some states, it is many times that.²⁹

Although the 2023 Australian Digital Inclusion Index indicates that people living in regional areas still experience greater challenges in accessing online services than those living in cities,³⁰ internet access in Australia is almost universal; in 2022, 99% of Australian adults had been online in the previous six months, and 93% had a home internet connection.³¹ Because of the broad access to online resources that the Australian population, regardless of location, enjoys,

²⁶ NSW Telco Authority. (2025). *NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy*.

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-02/NSWTA%20-%20Digital%20Inclusion%20Strategy%202025.pdf>, pp 29-30; Commonwealth of Australia. (2023). *Data and Digital Government Strategy*. Accessed at: <https://www.dataanddigital.gov.au/strategy>

²⁷ World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2022). *Global report on assistive technology*. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/354357/9789240049451-eng.pdf>, p. 93

²⁸ Kristen Purcell et al, (2012) *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2012/11/01/how-teens-do-research-in-the-digital-world/>

²⁹ Commonwealth of Australia (Digital Atlas of Australia). (2024, 18 June). *Land Borders – Borderlines*. Accessed at: <https://digital.atlas.gov.au/datasets/land-borders-borderlines/explore>.

³⁰ Julian Thomas et al, (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf, p. 9.

³¹ Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Communications and Media Authority). (2022). *Communications and media in Australia: How we use the internet*. <https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-12/How%20we%20use%20the%20internet%20-%20Executive%20summary%20and%20key%20findings.pdf>, p. 1.

online publication increases the equity of access to parliamentary information for remote Australians.

Case study: orders for papers regarding local infrastructure redevelopment

Between 2023 and 2025, the Council passed three orders for papers under standing order 52, requesting documents regarding the Albury Hospital redevelopment³². The Albury Hospital Campus is located at Albury, on the border between New South Wales and Victoria, over 400 kilometres from Sydney. Documents returned in response to orders for papers are currently provided in hard copy only, so Albury residents wishing to view them would have had to book a flight or make the approximately five-and-a-half-hour road trip to the Parliament of New South Wales.

In contrast, locals wishing to view documents returned in response to an order for papers regarding the Sydney Fish Market redevelopment and Infrastructure NSW governance³³ would face a journey to the Parliament of New South Wales of just over three kilometres, around 15 minutes on the road in peak hour.

Accessibility needs

In 2022, a little over one in five Australians had a disability.³⁴ This represents a significant proportion of voters, constituents, inquiry stakeholders, students who reference parliamentary documents, professionals who need to keep abreast of parliaments' doings, and other people who have an interest in the works of parliaments. The ability of people with disability to access parliamentary information is dependent on the accessibility of parliamentary precincts and websites.

When services are designed to be accessible or compatible with assistive technology, they enhance the ability of people with disability to participate in society.³⁵ A key method of

³² *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 2 August 2023, pp 329-330; *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 7 February 2024, p. 894; *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 26 June 2025, pp 2535-2536.

³³ *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 19 June 2024, pp 1270-1271.

³⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics). (2024, 4 July). *5.5 million Australians have disability*. Accessed at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/55-million-australians-have-disability>.

³⁵ World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Global report on assistive technology*, p. 5.

increasing accessibility and inclusion is through universal design, a practice of designing environments and services to be accessible to everyone and treating accessibility not as something nice to have, or something that can be achieved through work-arounds, but as a fundamental requirement of the design.³⁶

Most parliamentary practices and publications were designed, or have evolved from those designed, hundreds of years ago, before accessibility for people with disability was a consideration. The principles of universal design, identified in 1997,³⁷ were not conceived of, much less applied, when the physical environments and publication practices of most Westminster parliaments were developed.

The interlocking architecture of technologies that provide access to modern online services (from hardware to software to website contents) force parliaments into technological evolution, if only to save their services from incompatibility and obsolescence.³⁸ This means that parliamentary websites must be redesigned and remade much more frequently than other parliamentary processes and resources. Parliamentary websites, because of their comparative novelty, are also less confined by precedent and rules. Parliamentary websites, therefore, have more opportunity and flexibility than most parliamentary publications and environments to modernise and be redesigned to be universally accessible and offer a comparatively efficient opportunity to increase the accessibility of parliamentary information for people with disability.

Even if a parliamentary website does not meet all web accessibility standards, the additional option to view parliamentary documents online offers people with disability choice, even if neither is completely accessible, allowing them to use the method of viewing the documents that is more accessible to them.

Civics knowledge

The work of parliaments is often opaque to the general public, and the specialised terminology and procedures that parliaments employ can confuse and deter individuals from participating

³⁶ World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Global report on assistive technology*, p. 87.

³⁷ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, National Disability Authority. *The 7 Principles*. Accessed at: <http://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles>

³⁸ Dimitris Koryzis et al, 'Disruptive technologies for parliaments: A literature review.' *Future Internet*, 15(2) 2023, 66. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/fi15020066>.

in democracy.³⁹ With civics knowledge in Australian students having dropped to the lowest level since the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority began testing in 2004,⁴⁰ future voters may have even less confidence navigating parliamentary spaces.

Parliamentary environments, both physical and online, are generally used and frequented by people – members, staffers, parliamentary officers, lobbyists, public servants – with a level of familiarity with parliamentary processes and jargon. This familiarity assists with navigating the spaces and locating information; however, spaces and documents designed to be navigable for people with parliamentary knowledge may inadvertently be difficult and confusing to navigate to those without.

As discussed above, online publication of searchable PDFs allows relevant documents to be located by search engines, completely removing the need to navigate through a parliament's website and thereby reducing the level of civics knowledge required to access the documents. This does not reduce the importance of easy to navigate and understand parliamentary websites – ideally a user, having realised through their search engine find that a parliamentary website holds relevant documents, should be able to confidently navigate the website to find other relevant documents themselves, rather than being bewildered and forced to return to the search engine to locate anything else.

TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS

Artificial intelligence (AI)

Chatbots, which use AI to help them understand users' natural language queries, identify relevant information to answer the queries, and generate clear and useful responses, are a common public-facing use of AI technology.⁴¹ They are increasingly being used in the public

³⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Global Parliamentary Report 2022 - Public engagement in the work of parliament*, pp 24-25.

⁴⁰ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2024). *Civics and Citizenship 2024: Public Report*. Accessed at: <https://nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/nap-sample/nap-cc-2024-public-report.pdf>, p. 15.

⁴¹ Digital NSW. *Chatbot prompt essentials*. Accessed at: <https://www.digital.nsw.gov.au/policy/artificial-intelligence/chatbot-prompt-essentials>.

sector to answer routine questions and help members of the public find information.⁴² Public sector chatbots tend to operate under strict, predefined rules to a much greater degree than their commercial generative and conversational counterparts such as ChatGPT.⁴³ This allows for more standardised answers and therefore assurance for the agency that the answers will be factually correct and appropriately worded, but also generally results in the chatbots being too simplistic, less adaptable and less able to provide a rich, useful experience for users.⁴⁴

Chatbots can be an aid to help users navigate websites.⁴⁵ Due to the amount of information and specialised terminology found on parliamentary websites, public-facing chatbots could be very useful to help members of the public find and understand information. For example, a member of the public who is interested in learning more about a proposed law on climate change they have heard about may, if unfamiliar with the parliamentary meaning of 'bill', struggle to even find the correct part of the website, let alone locate the correct entry in a long list of bills. In this situation, a chatbot that could parse a natural language query such as, "what is the law on climate change the MPs will vote on soon?" and provide links to the webpages of a short list of relevant suggestions, could greatly increase the navigability of a parliamentary website for members of the general public.

Because of the amount of niche parliamentary jargon, the vast variety of parliamentary documents and processes that members of the public may want to ask about, and the likely specificity of questions, the simplistic rule-based chatbots with predefined answers favoured by the public sector would probably not provide a comprehensive or satisfactory service⁴⁶. However, generative and conversational AI chatbots, while more flexible and able to provide

⁴² Anna Grøndahl Larsen and Asbjørn Følstad, 'The impact of chatbots on public service provision: A qualitative interview study with citizens and public service providers'. *Government Information Quarterly*, 41(2) 2024. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2024.101927>.

⁴³ Grøndahl Larsen and Følstad, 'The impact of chatbots on public service provision: A qualitative interview study with citizens and public service providers'.

⁴⁴ Aggeliki Androutsopoulou et al, 'Transforming the communication between citizens and government through AI-guided chatbots providers'. *Government Information Quarterly*, 36(2) 2019. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2018.10.001>.

⁴⁵ Grøndahl Larsen and Følstad, 'The impact of chatbots on public service provision: A qualitative interview study with citizens and public service providers'.

⁴⁶ Grøndahl Larsen and Følstad, 'The impact of chatbots on public service provision: A qualitative interview study with citizens and public service providers'.

more specific answers on a broader array of topics, are also more at risk of providing incorrect or inappropriate answers.⁴⁷

The propensity of generative AI chatbots to fabricate relevant-seeming but untrue information, known as ‘hallucinations’, and present it as fact should give some pause to trusted public institutions considering the use of generative public-facing chatbots. The case of a Norwegian man who asked generative chatbot ChatGPT what it knew about him, only to receive a mixture of factually correct biographical information and a false claim that he had killed two of his sons and received a 21-year prison sentence for it⁴⁸ highlights these risks – what parliament would be happy with an official chatbot telling similar tales about its members?

Less egregious chatbot outputs could still cause discontent from members and parliaments. As conversational AI generates statements on command without immediate human oversight, the use of AI chatbots would give members and parliaments markedly less control over their messaging than they are accustomed to. Members would have less ability than they are used to on social media and in their parliamentary biographies to present and order their interests and achievements in a way that best represents their priorities, and parliaments could not be assured that the responses provided by a generative AI chatbot would always meet the standards of tactfulness and impartiality expected of parliamentary officers.⁴⁹

Web application programming interfaces (APIs)

An application programming interface (API) is a set of rules and protocols governing how applications communicate and share information.⁵⁰ Web APIs are APIs that allow communication and information sharing over the internet, and are usually accessed by connecting to a specific webpage called an endpoint. Public web APIs can be used to securely expose selected information which then can be read, downloaded, or used by another website

⁴⁷ Ahmad Fauzan Zaky and Chanifah Indah Ratnasari, 'Developing Rule-Based and AI Hybrid Chatbot for Academic Information Services'. *International Journal of Informatics and Computation*, 7(2) 2025, pp 755–768. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.35842/ijicom.v7i2.211>.

⁴⁸ Hanan Dervisevic, *Norwegian man files complaint against ChatGPT for falsely saying he killed his sons*. ABC News, 21 March 2025. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-21/norwegian-man-files-complaint-chatgpt-false-claims-killed-sons/105080604>.

⁴⁹ Markus Langer, Kevin Baum and Nadine Schlicker, 'Effective Human Oversight of AI-Based Systems: A Signal Detection Perspective on the Detection of Inaccurate and Unfair Outputs'. *Minds & Machines* 35(1) 2025. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-024-09701-0>.

⁵⁰ Commonwealth of Australia (api.gov.au). *Definitions*. Accessed at: <https://api.gov.au/sections/definitions.html>

or application. This is beneficial to users as it allows them flexibility to analyse and use data, which they might otherwise only be able to view on a series of webpages, in a way that suits their needs.

The public sector in Australia is increasingly turning to APIs as a way of sharing data. The Australian government has embraced the use of APIs as a means of sharing information between government agencies and with the public, with Australian Government Architecture, which provides guidance against which government digital solutions should be assessed, endorsing APIs as a capability to be developed.⁵¹ Data.NSW describes APIs as

*the most powerful way to make your data available for sharing", citing flexibility for end users, the ability to provide real-time data, and the compatibility of APIs with a broad range of technologies among benefits of data-sharing through APIs.*⁵²

Some Commonwealth parliaments already offer public web APIs. The New South Wales and South Australian parliaments both provide Hansard data in APIs, and the Queensland parliament provides various information including about tabled papers and members. The UK Parliament offers 12 public data APIs, which provide access to information relating to various topics such as members, oral questions, bills, statutory instruments, and Erskine May.⁵³

Once parliamentary information has been publicly released via an API, parliaments have limited to no visibility and control over how the information is used. While useful to the public and capable of facilitating the creation of balanced and informative third-party websites, APIs also run the risk of providing bad-faith or biased websites with unearned legitimacy. Institution-based trust, a tendency to trust born from faith in an institution or system, is a key driver of trust in information.⁵⁴ A prominent claim that information on a website is sourced from a parliament could therefore create trust in a website that uses cherry-picked or manipulated data to push a particular political message. Such a claim could also give the impression that the parliament is associated with or endorses the messaging of a site, which, if the messaging was

⁵¹ Commonwealth of Australia (Digital Transformation Agency). (n.d.). *Application Programming Interfaces (APIs)*. Accessed at: <https://architecture.digital.gov.au/capability/api>.

⁵² Data.NSW. (2024, July 15). *Making Data Available for Sharing*. Accessed at: <https://data.nsw.gov.au/making-data-available-sharing>.

⁵³ UK Parliament. *Developer Hub*. Accessed at: <https://developer.parliament.uk/>.

⁵⁴ Brad Love et al, 'Consumer Trust in Information Sources: Testing an Interdisciplinary Model'. SAGE Open, 3(2) 2013. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013492782>.

excessively partisan or objectionable, could be damaging to the parliament's reputation or its perceived impartiality.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to explore the evolution of publication practices in the New South Wales Legislative Council, the opportunities that modern, online publication methods provide parliaments with, and the impact that these opportunities can have on the ease and means with which the communities represented by parliaments access parliamentary information. The paper also discussed two emerging technologies associated with online publication, and their benefits and risks within a parliamentary context. The fast-paced evolution of technology will no doubt continue to offer new publication opportunities and solutions to parliaments. Parliaments should remain open to considering the adoption of any technologies that will increase the accessibility of their documents and information to the public they serve, in line with their roles in helping facilitate transparency in parliamentary and government processes. It remains to be seen which emerging technologies parliaments will choose to adopt and the impact they will have on the publication and accessibility of parliamentary information.