E-Mail in the E-Dáil?

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Given the robust and seemingly-passionate debate about the feasibility and desirability of e-voting in Ireland at the time of writing (Summer 2005), I began to wonder about the extent to which the current Dáil is 'e-aware' – that is how sophisticated are our elected representatives in terms of email and Internet usage. An extended period of convalescence following hip surgery afforded me the luxury of some time to investigate this issue.

A significant amount of detective work around various government and party websites was required initially just to establish email addresses and any personalised web sites for our 166 Dáil TDs[1]. Also, I wondered whether all constituents would be equally likely to elicit an email response from our elected representatives. I am a Computer Science Professor and felt that this could bias the response rate, although given the relatively poor support of educational institutions from government sources, I was unsure whether it would have a positive or negative effect. Thus, I created an alter ego, *Seosamh O Gallunach* (i.e. Joe Soap in Irish, although none of the respondents appeared to notice) who would also email TDs.

For each Dáil party, I then randomly allocated TDs into two groups of equal size. This process resulted overall in 83 TDs who received a simple email message from Professor Brian Fitzgerald and 83 TDs who received the same email message purporting to be from *Seosamh O Gallunach*. The message was the following.

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A Chara,

I would like to establish whether you are prepared to use
email to communicate with constituents. Hence this email
request.

Mise le meas,
<signed either Seosamh O Gallunach OR Prof Brian Fitzgerald>
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I sent the emails in two batches – one from Seosamh O'Gallunach to the previously selected 83 TDs and the other from Professor Brian Fitzgerald to the remaining 83 TDs. One week later – an eternity in email terms – I compiled the results. The table below summarises the overall findings:

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[1] Sincere thanks to Lorraine Morgan and Carol Ryan for their help with this task.

Response rate overall	42%	
Response rate to Professor		47%
Response rate to Seosamh O Gallunach		36%
Average time until response overall	26 hours	
Average time until response to Professor		21 hours
Average time until response to Seosamh O Gallunach		32 hours
Responses from Personal Assistants	17%	
Percentage of TDs responding per party		
Green Party		66%
Sinn Fein		60%
Fine Gael		59%
Labour		48%
Independent[2]		44%
Fianna Fail		31%
Progressive Democrats		25%
TDs with personalised websites	28%	
Working personalised websites		22%

So how do we interpret the results – well as Sir Robin Day once remarked: "The figures don't prove anything, but they are very interesting". The overall response rate of 42 percent is not indicative of an enthusiastic email-embracing Dáil. Also, the fact that 17 percent of responses came from a Personal Assistant is not encouraging as this runs counter to the pattern of brief but direct interpersonal communication which has been generally established with email. The average duration for responses is perhaps not all that bad, with the vast majority (80 percent) of those who responded doing so within 48 hours, and five TDs responding within one hour. Thus, it appears that there may be some degree of polarisation – the cohort of TDs who are 'e-aware' are quite advanced (although one TD composed the reply entirely within the subject field ot the email, which is a little bizarre), and the remaining 58 percent seem to be relatively aloof from email communication. Also, the low level of personalised web sites (28 percent of TDs), and an even lower level (22 percent) of *working* web sites – several did not link to anywhere meaningful or relevant – is not very encouraging. This does not suggest that TDs in the main have embraced the Internet and modern forms of communication.

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[2] The sole Socialist TD, Joe Higgins, was included as an Independent so as not to artificially bias results. Of course, apologies may be due, but this was the most the expedient categorization for the purpose of this study!

Also, it appears that not all citizens are treated equally. Seosamh O Gallunach elicited significantly fewer responses (11 percent fewer), and was responded to far less promptly (11 hours longer on average to receive a reply).

And which party is the most 'e-aware'? To assess this I constructed an algorithm based on response rate, duration until response, working personalised web sites. The accolade goes to the Green Party, followed by Fine Gael, with the other parties unfortunately some distance behind.

Of course it would be unfair to single out any individual for comment, but perhaps one exception is justified. One might expect that the Minister who spearheaded the ill-fated initiative to move to e-voting would be very evidently e-literate and to the forefront in replying. Sadly, he was not among the respondents!