

# MPs doing poor job of connecting with citizens online: Samara report

**There's significant opportunity for MPs to increase civic engagement online, Samara report says**

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You probably have opinions about your Member of Parliament. But do you have an opinion about your MP's website?

According to [new analysis](#) from the non-partisan think tank Samara, most MPs are missing out on opportunities to connect and engage with citizens online.

During August and September, Samara staff visited the websites of 300 MPs (excluding those of party leaders and then-empty ridings), and scored each site on a [14-point scale](#).

"There were three major things we were looking at with all the MP websites," explains Samara's Alison Loat.

"First, do they provide the basic information - who they are, where their offices are, how you can contact them. Second, do they explain what kind of job they're doing, both in Ottawa as well as in the riding. Third, do they use digital tools to connect with citizens, gather their points of view, and help them connect better with politics and get involved with it more directly."

If an MP listed their office hours, they got a point. If they offered a newsletter, they got a point. If they linked to Facebook and Twitter, they got a point. Bonus points were awarded for things like having a smartphone or tablet-friendly website.

Not a single MP website received a perfect score.

The average was 7 out of 14.

Loat sees significant room for improvement.

"There has been a decline in Canadians' interest in, and respect for, elected leaders over time," she says.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/mps-doing-poor-job-of-connecting-with-citizens-online-samara-report-1.2448877>

"We've seen huge drops in voter turnout over the last couple of generations. We have a slow, declining citizen engagement with politics, which I think at one point will affect quite dramatically the quality of leadership we have."

Loat says improved MP websites could help. "They don't require huge legislative changes. They don't require expensive public consultation. Changes can be made this afternoon."

Indeed, there are quick wins to be had. For instance, Samara found that only 15 per cent of MP sites list office hours. That's an easy fix.

## **Boosting civic engagement**

Could better websites really increase civic engagement? Mark Blevis thinks so.

Blevis is a digital public affairs strategist at Ottawa-based Full Duplex. His company recently [released a survey](#) of "engaged" Canadians - those "who were active within the #cdnpoli community on Twitter."

The survey found that "half of engaged Canadians (52 per cent) have contacted a politician through social media; 72 per cent of these reported receiving a response, with 62 per cent noting they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the response they received."

Blevis sees MPs' websites as their online "hub."

"I like to think of them as digital constituency offices," he explains. "It's really important that they deliver the same type of service to the public online as they would if somebody were to walk into their [physical] constituency office."

On his website, Blevis features a series of "[Digital Makeovers](#)" for politicians' websites, where he breaks down what works and what doesn't.

Like Loat, Blevis says many MP sites could be improved by adding information. However, he stresses the importance of making that information easy to find.

"If you go to a website and you have to dig to find the information, it's not being delivered. People won't spend the time to dig through and find stuff, and will find that a lot of MP websites are convoluted or, as Samara has identified, are missing core pieces of information."

## **Impetus for change**

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/mps-doing-poor-job-of-connecting-with-citizens-online-samara-report-1.2448877>

So, if Samara's right and many MP websites have room for improvement, where's the impetus for change?

"My belief is that it comes from the politician," Blevis says, noting that not every MP embraces social media tools.

He cites MP Peter Stoffer - who prefers to communicate with constituents by telephone - as an example.

"He's not engaged online," explains Blevis. "And I don't mean this pejoratively. Digitally, he doesn't have the social media accounts that everybody is clamouring for these days. And that's just the way he rolls. He's a very different type of politician.

"It's personality-driven communication. And if it's in your personality to communicate with people through your website, or to engage with them through Twitter or through a blog ... it really is driven by the individual. It's an extension of who you are, rather than a replacement."

If you want to assess your own MP's website, Samara has a [14-point checklist](#), and a [full list of MPs](#) at its website.