

Online strategies of members of the European parliament

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When the first social media site appeared, its goal was to link the students on a university campus so that they could exchange information. This application soon spread to linking (lost) friends and family, and was later extended to business and politics. Today social media are considered to be the marketing strategy du jour for corporations and organisations in the digitalised world. In a study that investigated the strategies of companies, government institutions and non-profit organisations (Zerfass, 2011), it was revealed that the professional role of the social media is increasing, with an average of seven social media sites being utilised by each public relations departments.

Social media have quickly been adopted by policymakers as well. To have a presence on social media, politicians need to have celebrity appeal in order to be successful and to be able to form “friendships” with the wider public. While creating a profile itself is indispensable, being active on the media is crucial to success. Over a short period of several years, social media entered the mainstream of political communication. On the EU level, social media has been used since the campaign for the 2009 European Parliament elections. Through the use of different websites, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have tried to connect better with the potential electorate, offer more information about their work and opinion, and mobilise their supporters. Since then, the use of social media has developed and is becoming slightly more systematic among the MEPs. This essay is based on semi-structured interviews with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), their advisors and campaign managers, held in the period January-June 2012.

New communication and information technologies are transforming existing forms of political communication (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011) through the use of social media, that permits more interaction and communication between political actors and the audiences (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013). The relatively recent creation of Web 2.0, as a new form of

interactive internet, gave new opportunities for politicians to reach out to audiences on social media websites, platforms and tools, designed to facilitate interpersonal interaction. However, not all countries, internet platforms or politicians use the same amount of interaction with their audiences, which was confirmed by the interviewees. At the same time, although some scholars (e.g. Papacharissi, 2006) argue that online political discussions promote greater citizen participation, it is questionable if the individuals who engage in participation on social media sites (through discussions, likes, forwarding content etc.) become more politically active offline i.e. if it can affect political participation and electoral turnout. That is one of the doubts, expressed both by scholars as well as politicians.

Nevertheless, political leaders on the EU level agree that the penetration of the internet into people's daily lives has brought about changes to their practices, in the sense that their communication and information habits and behaviours have changed. This is due to the ability to more rapidly gather, store and share large amounts of information; network with other politicians, party members and supporters; and to message citizens and others. The ability to establish personal connections with voters is the vast advantage of social media, but at the same time this makes individuals more responsible for their online presence and activities.

Many EU parliamentarians started to realise the strength and power of social media as a new medium that could be used for political promotion, only after their presumable success in the 2008 US elections' campaign. Parliamentarians and their advisers mostly think that social media can have an impact on the familiarity of European citizens with the EU and their elected representatives. For example, an interviewee noted that, "if it is used in a proper way, Facebook can be an instrument of approach because it allows dialogue with citizens" (MEP, personal communication, 1 March 2012). Many communication managers and advisors are very optimistic regarding its use, even believing that social media "will take over from classical methods" (communication manager, personal communication, 20 March 2012). They are considered to be "absolutely indispensable" (political advisor, personal communication, 1 March 2012) as they represent a very good way of communicating directly with a large audience.

However, among the interviewees, the majority see the internet mostly as a supplement to traditional media and although admitting the importance of being online, they stick to television as the main media campaign: "I think traditional media is still the most important, I have no doubt about this [...]" (political advisor, personal communication, 16 February 2012).

Yet, European political actors do not completely neglect social media because they agree that online tools can be an important additional component. As one of them explained, "There is a chance for more people to be informed" (MEP, personal communication, 8 May 2012). This is especially true when it comes to young people and the possibility to attract them, taking into consideration that they are predominantly using social media in order to get information and interact with others: "At the end a lot of young people are using it, so it's a chance to winning a great public space for the election" (MEP,

personal communication, 8 May 2012).

Through social media, different networks can be created between citizens and politicians, as well as between like-minded politicians themselves. This is a good 'viral' way of building a fan base, because it can help to gather and connect supporters who are politically like-minded, from which a bigger organisation, such as a political party or a political group on the EU level, can later benefit. Many campaign managers agree that personal presence and interaction are important for social media, especially in the long run, because the interaction makes a politician 'a real person' in the online world: 'If you do Twitter and Facebook, you have to be personable and interactive and present' (Political advisor, personal communication, 27 February 2012). However many politicians argue that being present on social media is very time-consuming, so if they do decide to get involved, they ask their assistants to do the job for them. As one MEP stated, "I do not normally make statements on social networks" (MEP, personal communication, 16 February 2012). Nevertheless, social media usually requires politicians to be more personable than on other media, so this is not considered a good tactic because a personal presence is often needed. As well as establishing closer contact, trust and sympathy through interaction with people, which is strategically important because 'people like politicians with a personal touch' (MEP, personal communication, 20 March 2012). One MEP stated that the relationship can become even closer: "[We] develop more personal relations with those whom we consider more constructive, creative and interesting" (MEP, personal communication, 27 February 2012).

Two major sites that are distinguished in European politics are Facebook and Twitter. While Twitter offers a very short and direct outlet, Facebook is more informal and interactive. Therefore, the use of the two sites needs to be complementary. Many campaign managers and politicians agree that Twitter is the most relevant and useful in politics at the EU level. This is due to the fact that people on Twitter know more about the EU than the average EU citizen and they often have links to politics, either professionally or through personal interest. Also, as they have decided to follow politics and politicians by receiving regular tweets, they are considered to be much more informed. This group of people generally consists of journalists, bloggers, experts and political 'junkies', who are often opinion makers as well. At the same time, as discussed above, European politicians use online tools to inform citizens in the first place; Twitter seems like a logical first choice.

Many of them use Facebook as well, but as it is considered to have more informal surroundings, politicians pay less attention to the comments of citizens. At the European level, a small minority use it for interacting with and engaging audiences.

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