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Online political communication strategies: MEPs, e-representation and self-representation

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Abstract

Research into the communication strategies of legislators has a long history. The European Parliament offers an opportunity to add to understanding of how legislators prioritise styles of communication, with a comparative perspective across twenty-seven nations. Through content analysis of online communication we investigate how the Internet is used by MEPs. Our analysis assesses three communication strategies: homestyle, impression management and participatory. We find that a homestyle strategy predominates followed by impression management. Participatory communication is emergent, but may earn legislators political capital as it appears that proactive communicators who offer participatory opportunities are more likely to build an online following.

Keywords

Legislators, Representation, strategic communication, homestyle, impression management, interactivity, social media.

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Introduction

Traditionally, the communication from legislators provides information on the various duties they perform (Rush, 2001). Studies of US legislators discuss the concept of homestyle, where communication focuses on a combination of her allocation of resources, the ways in which she presents herself to others and the explanation of her activities in Washington (Fenno, 1978). The strategy is to demonstrate their actual and potential representational capacity in order to shore up support when it comes to standing for re-election (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987). The use of Web 2.0 socially and politically has questioned the extent to which a purely informational mode of communication is tenable. Web 2.0 is a metaphor for the technological development of websites from a static informational paradigm to one that permits a range of interactions that can be user-to-site or user-to-user (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2007). Many studies have raised the question of whether more interactive forms of communication, between the represented and their representative are or should be prevailing (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). It is argued that the online environment, including websites and weblogs, and now social networking sites (SNS), Twitter and video or picture sharing platforms, can be used to support the representational link (Jackson, 2003).

The fact that this link can be purely virtual and online leads to this being defined as e-representation (Jackson, 2003; Pole, 2004) and offers a homestyle model, facilitated by platforms offering a range of conversational-style communication, that can develop stronger ties between the legislator and their constituents (Gibson, Lusoli,

Ward, 2008). Interactive communication also has the capacity to link the legislator to a wider network and extend their reach into the online political communication ecosystem (Chadwick, 2011). Representation-focused communication competes with a longer standing tradition in parliamentarians' communication strategy: impression management. It is suggested by works on the personalisation thesis (Mughan, 2000; Langer, 2007), that voter choices are increasingly driven by the personality and charisma of the individual. In order to reap the benefits of incumbency politicians are argued to increasingly be attempting to build a three-dimensional public persona, one that projects ordinariness and professionalism (Langer, 2007). Online environments empower the individual to create personal and bespoke communication tools at minimum cost. Wring and Ward (2010), reflecting on the use of the online environment during the 2010 general election in Great Britain, note "New media have been seen as providing more opportunities for individual candidates to personalise their message. Web 2.0 tools, in particular, also allow activists and interested supporters more scope to create their own campaigns and network with one another without having to go through party HQ" (p. 228).

In order to explore legislators' online strategic communication we analyse the online presence of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Analysing MEPs presents an opportunity to understand how communication strategies evidence legislators' communication priorities when resources inequalities are not a determinant factor. The research permits us to assess the extent to which personal and political characteristics influence prioritisation, as well as capturing comparative data covering legislators which represent all twenty-seven member nations of the European Union. Our research involved a detailed counting of the features identified as present or absent across all the platforms utilised by MEPs. Features were categorised as

pertaining to three specific strategies. Firstly, an informational service-oriented homestyle, highlighting the work and achievements of the legislator in order to demonstrate active service to those they represent. Secondly, a personalised, impression management strategy focusing on the individual characteristics of the legislator. Thirdly a participatory communication strategy which allows constituents, or any interested online user, to contact the legislator and discuss local or supranational political issues and contribute to the thinking of the legislator. The data enables us to understand how these strategies are prioritised as well as the role of the Internet within legislators' communication strategies and draw broader conclusions regarding the way the Internet supports the representative functions of parliamentarians. Drawing on previous studies of legislators online, and incorporating the notion that prioritisation in communication is an indicator of the importance given to communication modes and the image conveyed (Ingall & Crisp, 2001) we focus on three research questions:

RQ1. What is the balance between homestyle information provision, impression management and participatory strategies across MEPs' websites and linked online presences?;

RQ2. What factors appear to influence MEPs developing specific online strategies?;

RQ3. Can we identify benefits to the MEP from pursuing any specific combination of these strategies in their online communication?.

Legislators and Strategic Communication

This paper explores how EU legislators use the Internet to communicate to and with their constituents and what that indicates regarding their communication priorities. Homestyle conceptually offers a way to understand the relationship the

legislator seeks to have with his or her constituents. Studies have shown that websites, and this should extend to the range of auxiliary platforms available for online communication, are used in a similar manner to offline means of communication, to demonstrate their priorities and express their homestyle (Adler, Gent & Overmeyer, 1998). Homestyle focuses on identifying communication priorities but dovetails with the broader concept of constituency service (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987) and, for online environments, e-representation (Coleman, 2007)

E-representation concerns the extent to which the Internet supports the representative functions of elected members of parliaments within democratic nations (Jackson, 2003). Previous research has shown that e-representation is usually expressed in communication through the provision of information targeted towards specific voter groups, so using the Internet as a direct communication channel between the representative and a constituency (Bimber, 1998; Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Ward, Lusoli & Gibson, 2007) in order to explain their contribution to the area they represent within the legislature (Fenno, 1978; Denzau, Riker, & Shepsle, 1985). Despite trends in online communication moving towards a more interactive mode with the Web 2.0 era (O'Reilly, 2005), informing remains the predominant strategy. Where there is innovation in the use of the online environment, research has shown this is the preserve of younger MPs elected to represent constituencies with high technological penetration and where local voting patterns return close results (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). The online behaviour of parliamentarians may well be at odds with that of the online browser who may seek political information. Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas and Shah (2003), studying the uses and gratifications of online browsers, found those with a higher economic status, who we posit would be those most likely to access political websites, use the Internet for interaction, surveillance and

consumption. As parliaments, as a sum of their elected members as well as legislative bodies, need to form connections with citizens (Coleman, 2007), legislators may be required by those most likely to visit their websites or linked platforms to offer information while also being accessible and providing features that facilitate dialogue and interaction. Yet, most studies echo the finding that parliamentarians who are online fail to offer tools that facilitate “any significant reconnection or possible deepening of existing connections citizens have to their representatives or representative institutions” (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2008).

The most recent research from an e-representation perspective found adherence to an e-representation model was limited to detailing their work within the legislature on behalf of their constituency and specific constituents or groups thereof (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). However studies assessing the use of websites, e-newsletters, weblogs and social networking profiles found different platforms potentiate different communication strategies (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011a). The more traditional platforms and tools such as websites and e-newsletters are, on the whole, push communication tools designed to transmit information out to browsers or subscribers. On the other hand Web 2.0 platforms such as weblogs and social networking sites (the most popular of the latter being Facebook) provide an inbuilt architecture of participation which encouraged some legislators to provide space for, as well as on occasion entering into, discussions relating to policy. Discussions can range across a territorial axis (relating to specific constituencies or the nation as a whole) and an issue axis (relating to broad current political issues of a partisan or non-partisan nature). Furthermore weblogs and social networking sites provide spaces for interaction with no requirement for technological know-how; hence they facilitate conversation more. Still, few attempted to elicit two-way communication between

themselves and website visitors, not even constituents (though they were given specific details of how to contact the MP) or those interested in specific areas of policy which connected with the role of the MP. Studying the use of Twitter, Jackson and Lilleker (2011b) found that the majority of legislator's tweets were classified as adhering to an impression management strategy, promoting the legislator as a person rather than a representative. Therefore, legislators who have been the subject of previous research largely conform to an informational homestyle, one that provides information and contributes to an impression management strategy but avoids interaction with members of the online community. It is interesting to explore the extent this would be the case for legislators within the European Parliament. MEPs tend to work some distance from their constituents and national politics, they stand in a second order election to a second order parliament, hence they are given little attention by those they represent or their national media (Maier, Stromback & Kaid, 2011). The European Parliament is also perceived as lacking legitimacy, and greater communication via the Internet has been proffered as one panacea. Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate specifically promoted the use of the Internet at both the institutional and representative level in order to "strengthen and stimulate dialogue, public debate and citizen's participation" (European Commission, 2005). Therefore, in order to connect with those they represent, so legitimising themselves and the legislature, MEPs may be more likely to develop a more mixed communicational strategy that attempts to legitimise the European Parliament through informing constituents as well as offering them opportunities to have input into the thinking of the legislator.

Three Strategies for Online Communication

Research indicates a number of reasons why parliamentarians eschew an interactive communication. The most prominent of these is that they have limited resources for communication, therefore do not have the time or staff to monitor and respond to inbound communication (Jackson, 2003). MEPs have a higher budget than most national legislators, so have the ability to be innovative if they wish. National legislators also argue that the Internet adds little to their representative role, they claim those who wish to interact with them will do so face-to-face, in constituency surgeries, or privately by email (Jackson, 2003). While constituents can contact their MEP by email, and can visit local surgeries or the office of the MEP in Brussels, the possibilities for face-to-face interaction are rather limited. Williamson (2008) suggests there are also cultural barriers underpinning the lack of innovation. Legislators tend to prefer to control the parameters of communication and so will be unlikely to discuss policy with citizens outside of private spaces (see also Stromer-Galley, 2000). However, given the separation between the MEP and their domestic polities, and the drive within the EP for legitimacy across member nations, one could suggest MEPs might combine informing and impression management with a more interactive mode of communication.

We hypothesise that MEPs could follow three models of communication: Homestyle Information Provision (HIP), Impression Management Strategy (IMS) and a Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS). None of the models will appear in isolation but, by identifying which features of websites and linked presences support one strategy rather than another, we can identify the strategy that predominates. Previous studies have developed similar typologies, for example informing, involving, connecting and mobilising (Schneider & Foot, 2006; Schweitzer, 2008); information, participation and professionalism (Vaccari, 2008a) or informing, engaging, mobilising

and interacting (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer, Jacunski, Jackson, & Vedel, 2011). These latter studies focused on party websites, and conducted their analysis in the context of elections. Common to all studies is the informational typology, while Schneider and Foot (2006) separate interaction with the site and site host (involving) and facilitating interaction within a bounded space such as a forum (connecting), and Vaccari conflates these as participation, we follow Vaccari and other studies (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2008; Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer, Jacunski, Jackson, & Vedel, 2011) using the single label participation (involving both web and social media two-way interactivity possibilities). Outside of elections minimal mobilisation tactics will be utilised, however studies of candidates (Jackson & Lilleker, 2010) show a tendency towards personalisation and impression management. Hence our choice of three clear categories on which we elaborate further and base our analysis.

The most common model of political communication, online or offline, is providing information. MEPs who purely inform follow what we describe as Homestyle Information Provision (HIP) involving the strategic demonstration of the MEPs' active service within the EP and how that service benefits those they represent. The HIP strategy offers the perception of the representative as hard working and adherents would prioritise regularly updating their website with information of interest to citizens and journalists. The predominance of HIP would be consistent with previous research and would suggest little innovation within the communication of legislators (Foot & Schneider, 2008).

The online environment may be used by MEPs for an impression management linked to electoral imperatives (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). As suggested by Ward and Wring (2010), online platforms and technologies allow individual representatives to promote themselves directly to online publics. The Impression Management Strategy (IMS) is concerned with the promotion of the MEP as an individual. Self-promotion

provides an impression of symbolic representation, expressed through emphasising the ordinariness of the lifestyle and background of the elected representative, Symbolic representation works on the principle that a shared socialisation would equate to shared political positions (Lawless, 2004). At a more simplistic level, legislators can present themselves as qualified professionals and credible representatives. We suggest that this strategy is largely concerned with building support based on personality rather than political activity (Langer, 2013), perhaps appealing to journalists rather than constituents, but by gaining interest in them as a person rather than just a legislator they are able to gain a personal vote (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987).

A number of factors, offered by technological developments, suggest a more interactive strategy would be appropriate. The use of features such as SNS and weblogs have been foregrounded within studies of elections, particularly those which focused on the development of an online model of campaigning by Barack Obama in his successful bid for the USA presidency in 2008 (Johnson 2009). Interactive features, particularly those which permit conversations are found to enhance learning (Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas & Shah 2003), build communities (McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999), and encourage wider forms of participation (Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, H. & Gil de Zuniga, 2005; Shah, Cho, Nah, Gotleib, Hwang, Lee, Scholl & McLeod, 2007). The fact that interactive sites are able to provide space for a civic commons to interact, related to either a geographic or political identity, can be of benefit both to democratic engagement as well as the individual representative (Gil de Zuniga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2009).

The Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS) entails hosting features and creating participatory spaces which encourage website visitors, followers or friends on social networking sites to act as online advocates (Koch, Fuller & Brunswicker,

2011). More fundamentally, however, is the provision of opportunities for discussion around policies. Legislators can use interactive features to support the development of ideas and arguments relating to their legislative duties, for example soliciting local knowledge and experiences from constituents. While doubts have been raised as to the efficacy of interactive political communication (Hindman, 2009), the building of communities around ideas is a central feature of work on the democratising potential of the network society (Castells, 2009) and is argued to have significant impact on the self-efficacy of citizens (Gil de Zuniga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2009). As Hindman (2009) notes only a minority may engage, but if citizens feel there is a social presence (Rafaeli, 1988) and they are able to have influence within the networks they will participate (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, H. & Gil de Zuniga, 2005). Furthermore, though there is a lack of research on the impact of interactions with legislators, having some degree of meaningful input into the thinking of an elected representative theoretically should connect the individual to the democratic processes and institutions.

The community building aspect of Participatory Communication Strategy can aid the democratic and representative functions of the MEP, as well as building connections between the European parliament and member states' citizens (Coleman, 2007). MEPs' communication strategies can draw citizens towards them with the website functioning as a pull communication tool and create communities of interest around the MEP (McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999). MEPs can also build communities around their ideas and issues, thus developing strategies for releasing information about upcoming votes or campaigns (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). Interaction can be allowed on the website or alternative platforms such as weblogs, Twitter and video and picture sharing sites, the use of which is increasing among political actors (Panagopoulos, 2009). Ideas sharing can utilise non-synchronous

symmetrical or asymmetrical feedback elements, such as opinion polls, which allow MEPs to collect data explicitly, or through monitoring conversations, and engage in discussions around political policy with citizens. The extent to which Homestyle Information Provision or Participatory Communication Strategy is being adopted is of significant interest in order to understand online communication strategies as well as considering the potential impact in terms of the political engagement and participation of those who visit MEPs' websites and choose to participate (Gil de Zuniga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2009; Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010). We suggest that the embedding of social networking and Web 2.0 into politics has the potential to reshape how citizens participate in politics, and that an interactive and connection-making strategy may be even more important within non-election periods, but this is dependent on the opportunities potentiated by legislators and their communication strategists and website designers (Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010).

This article explores how European legislators use the communication potential of the Internet and whether they engage with the political communication ecosystem. Numerous political activists engage in a range of partisan and non-partisan campaigning activities and build followings for campaigns; these compete for the attention of politically engaged browsers. Within the political communication ecosystem, where there is both a hierarchy as well as a sense of interdependence (May, 2009), legislators' communication is no longer bracketed away from non-partisan activism (Castells, 2009). It is argued that politics is part of a 'big conversation' which takes place across websites, weblogs, social networking sites and microblogs and can involve a range of actors (Margolis & Moreno-Riano, 2009). It is the extent to which legislators participate and so facilitate the working of this interdependent and participatory ecosystem that we explore.

Method, Coding and Categorisation Strategy

Our data is developed from a content analysis of the 440 MEPs' websites linked from their official profile on the European Parliament website and any linked platforms or profiles on SNS.¹ Content analysis of the official websites was conducted in November 2010². The content analysis identified the presence or absence of 52 features. Both coders (the authors) passed inter-coder reliability tests (Cohen's Kappa (.81) and Krippendorff's Alpha (.81)), irregularities were checked and corrected. Websites were coded online or, but only when necessary to check details following the first coding, offline from the archived³ version of official websites.

For the purposes of our research we developed a series of coding categories by grouping together features within our content analysis to fit each strategy conceptualised in the previous section, these are as follows:

Homestyle Information Provision (HIP) is demonstrated through the presentation of information regarding the service of the elected representative to their nation or region and to parliament. The HIP strategy presents the MEP as a hard working public servant and a proactive communicator. To test for the presence of this strategy we coded for section(s) dedicated to work in the EP, focused on specific policy areas, or sections and documents which made EP work relevant to their nations and regions, as well we counted presences on other platforms (so including the presence of links to social networking and filesharing sites which also provide

¹ MEP profiles are provided on <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert/groupAndCountry.do?language=EN> [entry 02.11.2011]. Only 440 out of 736 MEP had official websites. Additionally we searched Google.com for 296 MEP by entering name and surname (we found that probably 166 of them had websites however they did not link it to their EP profile). Due to methodological issues (e.g. we were unsure that the websites found on google.com are official MEP websites, as in some case there were more than one website listed, some were not updated since 2009 or sometimes with the popular surname, the MEP websites was not listed among first 50 entries). To avoid all the problems caused we decided to exclude from the analysis all those MEPs who did not officially list their website address.

² November was chosen as a normal month, with MEPs into a daily routine after their summer holidays but not close to the Christmas break.

³ The data archives were downloaded to local computer at Sciences-Po, Paris. It was performed by TelePort Ultra provided by Tennyson Maxwell Information Systems, Inc.

information). These sections offer an insight into the working patterns of the MEP, the array of duties performed and the committees they sit upon. 14 items appearing on websites were categorised as adhering to this Strategy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .531$)⁴.

The Impression Management Strategy (IMS) is one of personalisation and denotes the inclusion of biographical or personal information; professional background; education; personal/family information; interests; sports and hobbies both on the website and social networking profiles and use of internal photo gallery or external photo or video sharing sites. All these provide a range of information about the MEP as a professional and/or individual and indicate their qualifications and specific character qualities (de Landtsheer & de Vrees 2011). 12 features were categorised under IMS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .652$).

The Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS) involves the inclusion of features that facilitate the creation of an interactive e-constituency which may function only in online environments (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). Members of an MEPs' e-constituency follow the work of an MEP but may also, on encouragement from the MEP, share material posted to websites or linked presences across online social networks. MEPs adhering to PCS will also be likely to provide online spaces where e-constituency members can engage in political discussions. Hence, to detect a Participatory Communication Strategy we focus on two types of behaviour. Firstly MEPs crowdsourcing by soliciting feedback or opinion data or encouraging their online contacts to extend their communication reach through social sharing. Secondly MEPs interacting or encouraging interaction, specifically providing spaces for open conversation without hierarchy and for ideas to flow both from and to the MEP. We

⁴ We decided to keep this strategy regardless of the low Cronbach score as George and Mallery (2009, p.231) recognize this score as 'poor'. However it is consistent with our theoretical assumption of the Homestyle Information Provision as well as with the existing literature on legislators use of the Internet.

suggest that conversations would be linked explicitly to the professional activities of the MEP and will adhere to e-deliberation communication models (Dahlberg, 2007). We categorised 19 items as relating to Participatory Communication Strategy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .743$). A full breakdown of the features classified for each strategy is included (See Appendix 1).

Our analysis firstly seeks to test which of the strategies best explain the MEPs communication, in particular whether there is consistent adherence to a model of homestyle information provision or if we can also detect strategies which involve personalisation or participation (RQ1). Secondly we ran regression analysis to find explanatory factors for using different strategies. These relate to personal characteristics of the MEPs, such as age and gender, country of origin characteristics (GDP, web penetration rate) as well as political characteristics relating to party, ideology, vote share and length of tenure. Regressions showed there were no country-specific differences. The variables are used in studies for explaining differences among a cohort of elected representatives (see Jackson & Lilleker, 2011a) in order to control for multi-level factors possibly influencing communication strategy (these are especially relevant for comparative studies where regional and country characteristics could be determinant). We additionally conduct an exploratory analysis to determine whether we can explain variations in the number of participants within MEPs' communities. Although it is impossible to get data on visitors to a website, we use as a proxy the number of fans or friends MEPs have gained on Facebook, which is the most popular social networking site used within most of the EU countries and, perhaps as a corollary, is most used by MEPs; and the number of followers on Twitter. While this limits the extent to which we can measure a communication effect, this measure does allow us to draw some inferences regarding the extent to which different communication strategies better attract an audience through the use of

features and communication styles. It is especially interesting if the more traditional communication strategies (HIP and IMS), based on a simple presence on the platform are sufficient for building an online following or if there is a need for a PCS strategy requiring more involvement from politicians (stickyness, responsiveness).

MEPs Online: Mapping the Adoption of E-communication

Prior to looking at specific e-representation or personalisation strategies we present basic data in order to give an overall topography for MEPs' use of the Internet (N=709). Personal characteristics,⁵ age (.969***) and gender (1.859***), are statistically significant and indicate that older and male MEPs are less likely to provide official links, suggesting they are either less likely to have a website or do not choose to advertise it. Party size has a statistically significant effect as MEPs belonging to major (1.737**) and minor (2.472***) parties are more likely to promote their websites than those representing the fringe parties in national parliaments. Despite there being no resource differential, there is no evidence MEPs representing smaller parties use the Internet to gain greater attention from citizens or the media than their counterparts representing major parties, despite suggestions that the Internet can benefit parties with lower resources and media interest (Ward, 2007, pp. 4-6). A positive relationship can also be identified for MEPs elected under more personalized voting systems (preferential vote (1.561**) in contrast to list voting) and the percentage of the national population having access to the Internet (2.740**) suggesting going online may be seen by some MEPs as electorally beneficial. Those MEPs who have sat for longer in the EP are more likely to have a website, this effect

⁵ In this paragraph we use outcomes from the logistic regression where the dependent variable was having=1 or not having = 0 an official link from the EP profile to the MEP's website. All numbers in the brackets are odds ratios with statistical significance *p<.10. **p<.05 ***p<.01

is especially strong for MEPs from the so called ‘new’ countries, who joined after 2004 (4.370***).

No other variables showed as being statistically significant for predicting having an online presence. As expected GDP per country (which we use as a proxy for country difference - as each country has a unique GDP rating) has no significant impact. There is also no significant predictors linked to representing new or old EU countries, or the ideology of the party the MEP represents. However, surprisingly, the size of the electorate is also not statistically significant, this is contradictory to our expectations as it was considered that MEPs who need to communicate to large populations would use the Internet as a channel to maximise their reach.

In order to compare adherence to the three strategies we generated Average Online Performance (AOP) indices similar to those used in previous studies (Farmer & Fender, 2005; Schweitzer, 2008; Vaccari, 2008b; Larsson, 2011). The AOP score was calculated by initially counting the number of features present for each category to create an overall mean per strategy. We then divided the mean score for each strategy by the maximum possible score in that category, e.g. females have an average performance of 4.56 for PCS, that number was divided by 19 (max possible score) which equals .240. This technique allows us to compare performance within strategies (which are groups of differing amounts of features). In table 1 the numbers in bold show the best performance in the group and statistically significant differences between groups, italics indicate the worst performance.

These data suggest that age and length of tenure are key predictors of innovation online. Younger MEPs and those sitting in parliament for their first term are most likely to pursue a Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS). Similarly, under 45s and those who were elected most recently are the most likely to personalise their online spaces. Party characteristics suggest that the most participation enhancing

parties are more on the left (Green and ALDE) (though these MEPs also perform well in other strategies). Interestingly, the left leaning parties seem most likely to follow Homestyle Information Provision while, broadly, the rightist are the most likely to follow Impression Management Strategy. Minor party MEPs, and those elected for neither list nor preferential voting systems, outperform across all strategies. The fact that voting system appears important for overall online performance indicates MEPs who are elected as individuals, and not from a party list, see a more innovative online presence as electorally beneficial or at the very least not harming their chances for re-election highlighting a rational choice in strategy design noted in previous studies (Ingall & Crisp, 2001). Given that parties and individual parliamentarians have historically raised fears regarding the impact of allowing citizens to publicly interact with them (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Williamson, 2008), we suggest for MEPs these fears are not outweighed by the perceived benefits.

Table 1 about here please

In table 2 we present the results of Poisson regression⁶ analysis for each strategy and the data suggests there are differential influences. Homestyle Information Provision (HIP) finds a gender difference with female MEPs being most likely to adopt this strategy; gender diversity is not statistically significant in influencing any other strategy.

As expected the generational difference is not statistically significant for information provision, as it could be assumed that regardless of age legislators need to broadcast information about their work. In contrast for the Participatory Communication Strategy, the age of the MEP is a strong indicator, with younger MEPs the most likely to be interactive. In terms of Impression Management there is

⁶ Poisson regression was chosen as the best statistical method for estimating count data variables (Wooldridge, p.645)

also a clear generational gap with younger MEPs the most likely to have employed this strategy.

MEPs from minor parties (based on number of seats won in the national legislature) are more likely to adopt HIP and Impression Management strategies. In general our data indicates (see also Table 1) that legislators from minor parties in national legislatures outperform other representatives. They seem to exploit in the most profitable way their presence in the European Parliament, probably also in order to be visible in their respective home countries.

Left wing MEPs (EP party ideology scale) are more likely to adopt Information Provision or/and Participatory Communication Strategy. This finding stays in line with previous findings on EP communication strategies during 2009 elections where left wing parties provide better information and try to engage more on their websites (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer, Jacunski, Jackson, & Vedel, 2011).

MEPs elected to represent ‘old’ EU countries and who have served the greater number of terms are least willing to interact. However representatives from the new EU member states seem to stress more their personal attributes through an Impression Management Strategy.

Surprisingly the only macro-level⁷ country-characteristic variable statistically significant is national GDP which influences pursuing an Impression Management Strategy. EU Legislators originating from wealthier countries seem to more appreciate the personalized strategy. None of the other country-specific variables occurred significant (also a simple dummy variable for each country was not significant for

⁷ The multi-level regressions were run for each strategies for model of different level variables (micro (individual), mezzo (EP parliament) and macro (country), not shown due to the lack of space, available from the authors). However no interesting differences were found (with the exception for gender difference influence on Impression Management Strategy, as women were less likely to use is, however the effect was lost when introducing EP and country characteristics. As expected after introducing new set of variables R² rose, achieving the final level indicated in the Table 2.

AOP or in regression analysis, results not showed here). Similarly variable describing the internet penetration rate per country appeared unimportant as an explanatory variable, which may indicate that politicians use online strategies regardless of the proportion of their national populations they may reach.

Table 2 about here please

Finally, in order to gain insights into the impacts of online communication by legislators, we attempted to assess the extent to which any aspect of the MEPs' communication strategy had an impact on the size of reach into the online community they earned. The perfect measure would be to obtain an accurate measure of website visits. Proxies for this, such as number of searches, are too small; hence we use here the number of fans or followers on Facebook or Twitter and determine whether there is a relationship to the MEPs' communication strategies. This is recognised as an imperfect measure but the size of a following indicates the extent the MEP has created an audience for their online communication. The main website may both drive traffic to and receive traffic from MEPs' auxiliary sites, but in the first instance Internet users may have gained awareness of the SNS profiles through visiting the website. MEPs with active SNS profiles and Twitter are the most proactive generally so are a subset of MEPs within which we can check for a relationship between proactivity and interest.

In order to analyze the factors influencing the size of an MEPs' community we ran regression⁸ (table 3) using only MEPs with profile on social networks (N = 191) as our subsample. Our explanatory model consists of the different strategies and

⁸ A multilevel regressions models were run, however as there are no significance differences only the final model is showed.

whether they updated their profiles during the period of analysis, while controlling for other individual and political variables. Introducing all three communication strategies into community size analysis helps us to recognize if only a presence on the web and social networks (HIP) is sufficient to attract a larger community or whether it is necessary to have a profile that offers some interactive elements (PCS), some personal information (IMS) and frequent updates.

Table 3 about here please

Among the control variables, those with statistically significant predictive value are political ideology of the party in the EP, the electoral system, the country's GDP and web penetration. MEPs representing more left wing oriented parties are more likely to build online communities. Parliamentarians from preferential (more competitive and personalised) electoral systems are more likely to attract a larger following online. Representatives from countries with higher GDP are also more likely to have larger groups of followings. Contrary to expectations we have found a negative influence of web penetration on social network community size. The higher the web penetration rate the lower the number of followers on social networks. Regression also confirms the importance of using features which offer more engaging and interactive experiences for building communities as adhering to a Participatory Communication Strategy is the only statistically significant strategy which has positive impact on the size of the community. It seems it is not sufficient to only have a social network profile (HIP) or to provide information, even if personalised (IMS).

Discussion: E-representation in the European Parliament

The predominant strategy that is followed by the majority of MEPs is to pursue an service-oriented informational homestyle model. MEPs communicate as the legislator and inform visitors to their websites of their work in the European Parliament and explain how this serves the nation and/or region they represent. This is highlighted by the fact that 390⁹ MEPs have a specific area devoted to their work in the parliament, 137 additionally have an area which is devoted to their region and 111 an area devoted to political issues which relate to committee roles they perform. The provision of areas which allow visitors to learn about the work of an MEP, the relevance of this to nations or localities, and their work on areas of specific interest is important. MEPs must legitimise their role by demonstrating their service as parliamentarians and representatives; however a purely informational homestyle may not satisfy visitors.

The HIP strategy may serve the browser who uses the websites of MEPs for surveillance, or the professional information seeker, but it is inconsistent with trends in online political communication (Johnson, 2010). It remains a key communication function for a legislator to demonstrate an active role within the legislature, offering transparency and accountability while simultaneously presenting themselves as hardworking parliamentarians and representatives of their constituents (Jackson, 2003). However, the broadcasting communication paradigm is challenged by social trends in using the online environment for two-way communication, and the co-creation and sharing of content (Koch, Fuller & Brunswicker, 2011). These interactive practices lead to more social experiences, the reduction of hierarchies and the formation of connections (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, H. & Gil de Zuniga, 2005).

⁹ Out of 440 MEP under investigation

The challenge for legislators is, whether, when providing spaces for browsers to create content, whether responses to questions, comments on weblogs posts or input into political discussions, they suggest a shift to a function that is more consistent with acting as a delegate (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2007). Research suggests that those who participate politically online, as avid weblog readers, commenters, authors or contributors on the myriad social media platforms are highly motivated, with a high socio-economic status and high degrees of political knowledge (Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010, 2010). These individuals are likely to have clear objectives for visiting a site (Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas & Shah, 2003) and expect a return on any investment of time or mental resources (Tedesco, 2007).

These visitors are only served by a minority of younger MEPs. It is they who are most likely to provide a personal news feed, and this may be linked to feeds going to, or coming from, SNS or Twitter. Therefore the most proactive and interactive MEPs deliver news using an array of platforms: 198 use Facebook with a further 42 having other additional profiles on social networking sites; 176 use a weblog, 174 YouTube, 111 Twitter. All of these platforms allow the MEP to deliver content to visitors while also allowing visitors to share, comment or post content themselves. In fact a reasonable number of these MEPs actively encourage these practices, 137 promote the sharing of content they created, 140 encourage comments on their Facebook profiles, 60 encourage the same on their weblogs and 55 provide a forum. These features encourage visitors to participate in political discussions, have their say on political issues and so inform the position and arguments of the MEP. The level of proactivity, matched with the likelihood of gaining a following, suggests some MEPs recognise the potential mutual benefits to be gained from having an engaged, participatory following (Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas & Shah, 2003).

While tentative, we identify some interesting indicators of the impact from pursuing different strategies which can be used to shape future research. While using friends on Facebook and followers on Twitter is an imperfect proxy for the success of the communication strategy of an MEP, we find that those who follow an interactive strategy earn a larger following. The Homestyle Information Provision and Impression Management Strategy strategy has no impact upon gaining a following. . This chimes with research that suggests that online audiences expect certain types of communicative behaviour and may reward political representatives who adhere to the rules of the online environment (Tedesco, 2007). We suggest a combination of interactive communicative features encourage visitors to the websites of MEPs to demonstrate their support for the use of these features and they will join groups sponsored by the MEP and award them permission to communicate with them. The online politically engaged are more likely to follow MEPs who allow some degree of comment, solicit feedback and are proactive in encouraging participation from visitors to their websites. We posit that a Participatory Communication Strategy may also have a positive impact upon those who visit MEPs' websites and participate. There is evidence that participation enhances perceptions of political efficacy (Semetko & Valkenburg, 1998), and encourages further civic and political participation (Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005; Rojas, 2008). Therefore, parliamentarians who encourage interaction may be contributing more broadly to democratic engagement.

Conclusions and Future Research Agenda

Our data offer insights into the communication strategies of a range of legislators. In contrast with studies undertaken within single nations, there are no resource differentials between MEPs; hence we are able to identify the personal, political and national characteristics which lead to adopting differing communication

strategies. MEPs predominantly pursue an information-driven communication strategy (HIP) designed to position them as hardworking representatives. This is coupled with, for many MEPs, a strategy designed to present them as symbolically representative (IMS), appealing to voters through their backgrounds, lifestyles and qualifications. Participatory Communication Strategy is one that is emerging and is pursued mostly by younger MEPs. While MEPs who represent minor parties and who are elected using individual-centred mechanisms are more likely to have a website, but do not go beyond the HIP information provision strategy. It is impossible at this stage to measure for correlation between Internet use and votes received without accurate longitudinal data, using the size of followings on social networks or Twitter as a proxy there is evidence that MEPs who have highly interactive strategies are able to gain an audience they can talk to and talk with. This finding might suggest there could be political capital in having a more participatory online presence. Certainly a minority of MEPs are at the forefront of developing highly active communities similar to a civic commons (McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999), which may have broader political value within the context of democratic engagement (Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010), but they are a minority.

Analysis of the way the Internet is used by legislators is a field of academic study that has expanded significantly in recent years and particularly since the technological developments associated with Web 2.0. The extent to which communicational innovations in technology or society are utilised in politics have largely dominated the research agenda. Research has questioned the embeddedness and utility of interactive features within political communication, however the field must now accept that interactivity is emerging as a feature of online political communication and move to focus on the questions of how and with what effect. We therefore propose research should focus on two areas drawing on the indications

provided by these data and assumptions drawn from the key findings: firstly assessments of the strategic objectives that underpin adopting an online communication strategy; secondly gaining an understanding of the cognitive impacts of communication strategies upon those who visit legislators' websites and in particular the impact of enjoying participatory dialogue via weblogs, forums of social networks. As yet little is known about those who participate in political discussions online, and nothing since the development of Web 2.0 technologies.

Research has recognised that political communication is strategic (Manheim, 2011). The extent to which online political communication is also strategic is under explored. Our data suggests discrete but interlinked communication strategies are emerging. Currently, there is a generational divide and perceived electoral benefits may also be a driver of strategic thinking. These analytical assumptions hold face validity but further research is required to test these through interviews with politicians and their communications team¹⁰, comparing data across a range of political and national contexts. Furthermore, a greater understanding is required of who politicians want to connect to within the online environment. We make the assumption that a combination of constituents, issue-specific activists and journalists, all with a specific interest in politics and the activities of the legislator, are the most likely potential visitors.

The second strand of future research regards the subject of audiences. Building upon our indications we need more empirical research on whether visitors to legislator' websites wish to be passive information receivers or active participants in discussion and, assuming that both groups exist, what members of each group seek from their visits. This connects to an existing uses and gratifications research agenda

¹⁰ Originally the in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys with MEP and office members were a part of this research project, unfortunately the response rate of the MEP offices was at the 3% level.

which has explored readers and authors of weblogs (Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas & Shah, 2003). Research among participants in the political ‘big conversation’, who seek spaces where they are able to make contributions, needs to focus on understanding both behaviours and effects. Behavioural research should focus on the extent of participation, in terms of single visit contributions or conversational communication, and what motivations drive behaviour. Effects research should encompass both immediate gratifications, in particular feelings of self-efficacy, as well as attitudes towards the individual politician, the democratic process as well as impacts upon future online or offline political participation and voting behaviour. These questions cannot be answered by this study. We find indications of embedded and emergent strategies, and a more participatory communication strategy may be the mode of the future. We also find indications that this pays dividends in finding legislators a following who will discuss politics, share ideas and amplify the legislators’ campaigns. These indications require further testing and analysis but suggest a new trajectory for online political communication research.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Average Online Performance scores for MEPs using different strategies

	Homestyle Information Provision (HIP)	Impression Management Strategy (IMS)	Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS)
General score	.425	.311	.235
Individual characteristics			
Male	.411	.321	.233
Female	.447	.297	.240
<35 years old	.444	.347	.321
36 to 45 years old	.403	.351	.267
46 to 55 years old	.438	.298	.226
>56 years old	.421	.293	.205
Political characteristics			
1 term in EP	.422	.320	.251
2-3 terms in EP	.425	.315	.239
4 and more terms in EP	.435	.266	.168
GUE	.370	.212	.201
Green	.508	.311	.291
S&D	.423	.310	.245
ALDE	.466	.315	.282
EPP	.419	.323	.215
EFD	.303	.271	.217
ECR	.368	.309	.193
NAM (not associated)	.405	.241	.251
Country characteristics			
Major parties	.415	.305	.223
Minor parties	.473	.346	.275
Fringe parties	.380	.267	.246
Old EU (15)	.439	.300	.241
New EU (12)	.391	.339	.223
List voting system	.432	.297	.223
Preferential voting system	.414	.328	.250
Other voting systems (Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta)	.459	.333	.263

Table 2: Poisson regressions on communication strategies

	Homestyle Information Provision (HIP)	Impression Management (IMS)	Strategy	Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS)
Personal characteristic				
Gender	.063 (.033)*	-.081 (.053)		-.018 (.067)
Age	-.002 (.001)	-.006 (.002)***		-.013 (.003)***
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)				
Major parties	.129 (.099)	.038 (.103)		-.082 (.123)
Minor parties	.224 (.099)**	.208 (.111)*		.068 (.125)
Country characteristics				
Preferential voting system	-.008 (.035)	.072 (.052)		.091 (.068)
GDP 2009	.151 (.143)	.455 (.154)***		.205 (.276)
Electorate size	.055 (.045)	-.016 (.058)		-.052 (.091)
Web penetration rate	-.002 (.116)	-.242 (.149)		-.110 (.217)
EP characteristics				
EP party ideology scale	-.027 (.013)**	.007 (.020)		-.051 (.024)**
Membership in EP commissions	.008 (.017)	.017 (.028)		.025 (.034)
Terms-old in EP	-.001 (.017)	-.001 (.028)		-.055 (.032)*
Terms-new in EP	-.086 (.065)	-.042 (.077)		.011 (.133)
'new EU'	.169 (.129)	.377 (.161)**		-.120 (.265)
Wald Chi ²	44.20	46.69		34.16
Pseudo R ²	0.014	0.037		0.017

Note: Models are results of Poisson regression, robust, with Standard Error in parentheses. Dependent variables are continuous Homestyle Information Provision (HIP) (0-14), Impression Management Strategy (IMS) (0-12), Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS) (0-19). Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm); electorate size (ln); Web penetration rate (ln); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1-7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1-7 scale); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (scale, 0-7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (scale, 0-2); 'new EU' - countries joined EU after 2004 (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0). See Appendix 2 for full breakdown.

*p<.10. **p<.05 ***p<.01

Table 3: Poisson regression coefficients for online community size of the MEP being present on Social Networks (sum of number of friends or followers on Facebook and Twitter)

	Online strategies and community building
Online strategies	
Homestyle Information Provision	-.016 (.049)
Impression Management Strategy	-.071 (.057)
Participatory Communication Strategy	.160 (.064)**
Updating	.001 (.000)
Personal characteristic	
Gender	.244 (.179)
Age	-.011 (.011)
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)	
Major parties	-.064 (.354)
Minor parties	-.060 (.324)
Country characteristics	
Preferential voting system	.570 (.204)***
GDP 2009	1.02 (.606)*
Electorate size	-.073 (.305)
Web penetration rate	-2.316 (.756)***
EP characteristics	
EP party ideology scale	-.115 (.069)*
Membership in EP commissions	-.001 (.081)
Terms-old in EP	-.042 (.094)
Terms-new in EP	-.039 (.350)
'new EU'	-.401 (.525)
Wald Chi ²	61.97
Pseudo R ²	.4069

Note: Models are results of Poisson regression, robust, with Standard Error in parentheses. Dependent variable: community size (continuous, number of friends on Facebook + number of followers on Twitter, 0-8752) only for those MEP with SN profile N=191. Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm); electorate size (ln); Web penetration rate (ln); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1-7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1-7 scale); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (scale, 0-7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (scale, 0-2); 'new EU' - countries joined EU after 2004 (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0). Online Strategies HIP, IMS, PCS (as in table 1); Updating (continuous) – sum of number of entries in November on website, blog, Facebook and Twitter. See Appendix 1.

*p<.10. **p<.05 ***p<.01

Appendix 1

Features Categorised by Strategy

Homestyle Information Provision (HIP)

Link to NGO; Link to own political party; Link to other political organizations; Link to official EP web sites; Special section: regional/national information; Special section: special interest issues; Special section: work in EP; Registration on the web; Invitation to visit Brussels; Possibility to become a member of party; Update on the website; Any form of newsletter communication; Profile on SNS; Profile on Twitter

Impression Management Strategy (IMS)

Official profile of MEP; Videos online; Online web cam; Photo gallery on the web; Online photo gallery (e.g. Picassa, Flickr); Information about family (web site); Information about family (social network profile); Information about hobby (web site); Information about hobby (social network profile); Information about education (social network profile); Information about additional interests (books, films) (web site); Information about additional interests (books, films) (social network profile)

Participatory Communication Strategy (PCS)

Web site update in November; Sending newsletter in November; Online forum or chat; Blog; Update on blog in November; Possibility to comment on the blog; Blogroll; Online polls; Registration on the web site to see reserved content; Possibility to send content of the web site to others; Invitation to visit Brussels; Video channel on video sharing websites (e.g. Youtube or Dailymotion); Online photo gallery (e.g. Picassa, Flickr); Link to own social network profile (Facebook and other); Update on Facebook in November; Possibility to comment on Facebook; Profile on Twitter; Update on Twitter in November

Appendix 2

Independent variables table 2 and 3	Explanation	Source
Preferential voting system	Compare to list and transitive vote	Tableau récapitulatif des règles électorales de chaque État member, Robert Schuman Foundation
GDP 2009	GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards ((PPS) (EU-27 = 100), (natural logarithm)	Eurostat
Electorate size	Number of country population divided by number of seats in EP per country, (natural logarithm)	Eurostat and EP
Web penetration rate	% of population using internet per country, (natural logarithm)	http://www.internetworldstats.com/
Party ideology scale	from left to right on 1-7 scale, GUE(1), Greens, S&D, ALDE, EPP, EFD, ECR(7)	EP
Terms-old in EP	Number of terms per MEP from EU countries before 2004, scale 0 to 7	EP
Terms-new in EP -	number of terms per MEP for countries joining EU after 2004, scale 0 to 2	EP
New EU	countries joined EU after 2004, dummy for 12 countries	EP