



Politicians Online! MEP Communication Strategies in the Internet Era

Stefano Braghiroli

Abstract

The last decades have witnessed a dramatic growth of internet-based communication. This phenomenon and its still partially unexplored potential have increasingly attracted the attention of a growing number of political entrepreneurs. This paper analyses to what extent it has characterised vertical communication between politicians and voters looking at a very particular group: the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

To conduct the analysis, this study categorised an impressive number of MEPs' individual websites in the 6th European Parliament (EP) according to their structural, graphic and informative/communicative features. Accordingly, quantitative and qualitative cross-country and cross-party variance have been explored taking into consideration a wide array of potential explanatory dimensions, including socio-demographic, country-level, ideological, and electoral factors. The paper also presents some preliminary figures concerning the most recent developments in the current EP and possible future trajectories.

This study proposes a categorisation of different MEP types on the basis of their e-activism: those who are still reluctant to embrace internet-based communication, those looking at the web only as a complementary tool alongside more traditional forms of communication (e-MEPs) and those who invest a fairly amount of resources in these new forms of communication (MEPs 2.0). Our findings show that, despite the relevant cross-country and cross-party variance, the last group of MEPs 2.0 is dramatically growing vis-à-vis the other two.

When it comes to the analysis of MEPs' personal web-pages, our study shows that, by and large the features of the sites and the communication strategies adopted are generally specifically designed to target MEPs' 'electorate of reference' in terms of expected *demand* and proposed *offer*.

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POLITICIANS ONLINE! MEP COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN THE INTERNET ERA

EPIN WORKING PAPER NO. 29/SEPTEMBER 2010

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the personalisation of politics has intensified with the rise of new technologies (Blondel, 2005; Higley & Pakulski, 2007). In particular, political candidate websites have grown both in number and sophistication. The wide variety of options available to candidates ranges from simple web pages to extremely flexible and interactive platforms aimed at conveying bidirectional flows of communication between the candidate and voters. There are two basic objectives driving this trend: 1) improving the candidate's chances of getting elected, and 2) staying in touch with the constituency once elected.

One example of successful web politics took place in the 2008 US presidential election. Wide use of Internet-based networks and interactive participatory tools within the framework of the electoral campaign contributed significantly to the Democratic candidate's success. What were at the time non-standard forms of political communication targeted and mobilised effectively social groups (such as young people and first-time voters) who usually were disconnected from politics and deaf to politicians' traditional appeals. The platform *my.barackobama.com* helped millions of supporters organise their local communities in order to support and interact with the candidate. This new form of politics is likely to change the shape of all campaigns in the democratic world. "For Obama the new method was also bang on message. His liberalism is not a top-down, managerial variety; it's more in line with progressive traditions of self-empowerment. A social network was the perfect medium".¹

In Europe the phenomenon of Internet-based political communication appears less sophisticated and more primitive in its expression; however, there are indicators of rapid growth at both the national and transnational levels. On the eve of the 2009 European elections, the Party of the European Socialists (PES) launched the initiative "Your manifesto": an open online consultation to define the party's electoral manifesto. According to the organisers, more than 3,000 activists joined the website (<http://elections2009.pes.org>) and the consultation involved more than 300,000 visitors, with hundreds of posts and videos. A draft manifesto was drawn up on the basis of the consultation, which provided the foundation for the final PES manifesto² adopted by the party in December 2008.

At the EU level, unlike in national contexts, not only is public awareness generally limited – and media coverage almost inexistent – but so is scholarly interest, both in the European Parliament

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¹ See Andrew Sullivan, "Barack Obama is master of the new Facebook politics", *The Times*, 28 May 2008 (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/andrew_sullivan/article3997523.ece, accessed on 11 January 2009).

² The PES manifesto is available at http://www.pes.org/downloads/PES-Manifest_EN.pdf.

(EP) and outside it. For this reason this paper focuses on the web politics of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

The questions that the present study poses and addresses are: Is the general trend towards innovating political strategies also influencing MEP electoral communication? Is it possible to identify the defining traits of a European parliamentary dimension to this trend? What future developments might we expect? These basic questions still lack credible answers. In our view, the EP's unique nature – especially its plural and multinational character – makes it a perfect laboratory for assessing the determinants of MEP communication strategies.

This study examines the nature of MEP 'web tools' in the 6th EP (2004-2009) and the extent to which their features reflect the complex nature of the EP environment ('Europeanisation of communication'). To conduct this study, a variety of structural and graphic features of MEP websites have been identified, standardised, categorised, statistically analysed, and, finally, collected into a unique data set controlled for a wide array of pluridimensional factors at both micro-/individual and macro-/country levels.

Conceived as an exploratory study towards a clearer and more accurate understanding of MEP Internet-based communication styles and political strategies, our analysis aims to discuss possible future trajectories of the phenomenon and, in so doing, provide a useful basis for further investigation.

2. Identifying MEPs 2.0

There are two basic questions to be addressed. First, how does the phenomenon of Internet-based political communication vary both quantitatively and qualitatively? And second, what factors explain this variance? Our research seems to have potential for innovation in two different directions. On the one hand, it represents the first cross-country attempt to include a relevant number of MEP websites (with an exclusive focus on the supply-side). On the other hand, it addresses new dimensions of vertical political communication. It also embraces a more diversified array of explanatory factors (at both micro-/individual and macro-/country levels).

In the following sections, we will assess the relevance and the nature of MEP Internet-based political communication in the 6th EP, exploring cross-country and cross-party differences.³ In the final section we will briefly discuss the current state of affairs and possible short-term developments in the 7th EP (2009-2014).

There is a wide range of tools used by the MEPs in addition to personal websites: blogs, social networks, simple or complex web pages, etc. The degree of sophistication of the 'web tool' and the way one MEP decides to interact with his/her constituency or audience might well affect the nature of the message conveyed. The nature and intensity of information flows are also key aspects. Given the high degree of variance of the web pages analysed, straightforward classification criteria are required.⁴

³ The present study is based on an original data set developed between January and February 2009. Only MEPs' individual sites have been coded as "personal web pages" and therefore included in the data set. Collective web pages of the national delegations or MEPs' personal sections in the parties' official websites have been systematically excluded. All EU member states (with the exception of Bulgaria and Romania) have been included in the analysis. On the whole, a sample of 309 personal web pages have been categorised (on the basis of 422 randomly selected MEPs).

⁴ The definition of such criteria to evaluate MEP websites represented a key challenge in undertaking the project, owing to the necessity of dealing with extremely different national traditions and (at least) 19 languages. Thus the primary goal has been to define classification criteria which were both informative enough and not subject to contextual changes. Given this structural limit, our study focuses more on the

One of the analytical dimensions of our study focuses specifically on interactivity. Here, we considered whether, and to what extent, the flow of information is unidirectional or bidirectional. This emerges as an extremely relevant parameter, as it defines the way the ‘web tool’ is thought to work: either to disseminate information or to establish some kind of participatory dialogue with users (the constituency). Similarly, the variable ‘update’ is an indicator of an MEP’s degree of *current* involvement in the management of their website and their *current* interest in using an Internet-based communication tool. To put it simply, it might well be that one website appears highly informative and interactive, but, when looking at the updating process, we discover that the last post dates back to one year ago.

The variable ‘multilingualism’ deserves special attention. Given Parliament’s multinational nature and the relevance attributed to multilingualism at the EU level, we expect a specific motivation behind one MEP’s choice to develop a website section in a foreign language. Sometimes languages have strong symbolic significance; they represent distinct identities and cultures. If we consider the case of regional/minority languages such as Euskara in Basque Country, Gaelic in Scotland or Hungarian in Slovakia, the decision to include these languages has clear political and identity connotations. The decision to translate sections of his/her website into one or more foreign languages might also be related to one MEP’s idea of constituency and potential audience in a more European perspective. The variable is also supposed to register the degree of ‘Europeanisation of communication’.

A final set of variables has to do with MEP ‘visual identity’. Symbols seem to matter far beyond their factual meaning. We detected two basic graphic features potentially identifiable in all MEP websites, regardless of their nationality and language: party logos and flags. We distinguished between national and European banners. The absence/presence of one, the other or both may mirror concrete implications in terms of loyalty, legitimation and identity.

Four sets of control factors, both at the macro-/country and micro-/individual level, have been introduced (see Appendix 1). A first set includes three standard socio-demographic features: gender, age and education. A second group of variables focuses on country-level factors (postcommunist heritage, country size, and Mediterranean or Scandinavian-Baltic region). A third set of factors addresses the effect of partisanship on MEP Internet-based communication styles (left/right divide and niche vs. mainstream parties). The last set of control variables deals with electoral factors both at the macro- and micro-level (parliamentary tenure, past political career, open lists and party centrality⁵).

3. Findings

Although they share the same institutional environment, MEPs display different attitudes and reactions when faced with Internet-based politics (see Table 1). Some MEPs simply ignore it. In the 6th EP the MEPs without a personal web page represented 26.8% of the sample. A plurality of them (46.7%) seemed to look at Internet-based political communication as a subsidiary object

‘observational side of the analysis’ than on a content-based assessment of the websites. Priority has been given generally to the quantitative features of the web pages rather than to their qualitative side.

⁵ When it comes to the assessment of candidates’ *liberté de manoeuvre*, the analysis focuses on two indicators: the size of the electoral districts and (again) the degree of openness of the electoral lists. These factors may clearly affect MEPs’ willingness to become involved in Internet-based communication with their constituency, in terms of perceived electoral return (cfr. Carlson & Strandberg, 2005). We assume that a candidate-based system with an open ballot in local constituencies gives the candidate a high degree of independence in the conduct of the campaign, whereas a party-based system consisting of fixed lists in one nationwide constituency clearly reduces his/her role vis-à-vis the central party (Bowler & Farrell, 1993; Faas, 2003).

vis-à-vis more traditional forms of electoral communication (we shall label them ‘e-MEPs’⁶). Finally, for a conspicuous minority of MEPs, 26.5%, it seemed to represent a fundamental tool of communication and bidirectional dialogue with the constituency. Often, the idea of constituency was delimited by the national borders, sometimes it went beyond them. We shall call these parliamentarians ‘MEPs 2.0’.⁷

Table 1. Three categories of MEPs

<i>Type of MEPs</i>	<i>Features</i>	<i>Relative weight</i>
No website	Absence of personal web page	26.8% (113)
e-MEPs	Basic/Unsophisticated website Low/Mid-interactivity Low/Mid-informative level Infrequent update	46.7% (197)
MEPs 2.0	Sophisticated website Mid-/High interactivity Mid-/High informative level Frequent update	26.5% (112)

3.1 A general picture: Cross-country and cross-party variance

Figure 1 summarises the distribution of MEP personal web pages across the 25 member states on the basis of our sample. On average, almost three-fourths of the MEPs (73% of the total) had some sort of Internet-based platform. However, cross-country variance seems very relevant. Four national cohorts emerge as the most wired; all of the Danish, Finnish,⁸ Hungarian and Slovenian MEPs included in our analysis (29 units) have indeed some sort of ‘web tool’. The highest percentage of MEPs 2.0 can be found among the Danes (80%), Austrians (43%) and Maltese (40%), while three delegations (Latvia, Estonia and Cyprus) do not include a single MEP 2.0.

It seems quite difficult to identify consistent macro-territorial dimensions. What emerges is that MEPs from Mediterranean countries lagged a little behind others. First, none of the Mediterranean delegations was ranked among the ten highest scoring delegations.⁹ Second, three Mediterranean countries, Portugal, Cyprus and Spain, presented the lowest number of MEP personal web pages (cfr. Jankowski, Foot, Kluver & Schneider, 2005). The case of Spain is striking: on average, only one out of four MEPs had an individual web page!

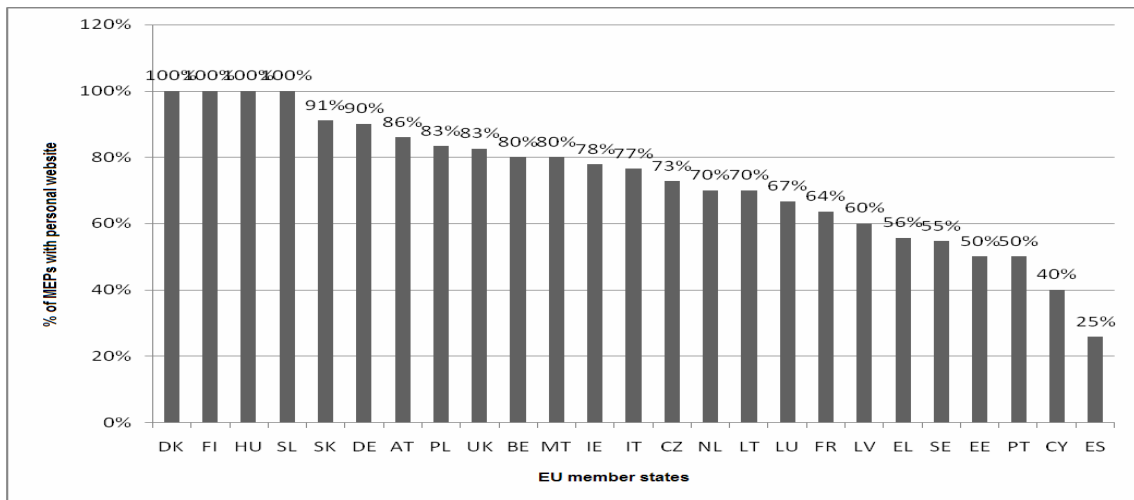
⁶ E-MEPs are characterised by basic (0) and not updated (0) web pages, with mid- or low informative (1 or 2) and interactive level (1 or 2).

⁷ MEPs 2.0 are characterised by sophisticated (1) and updated (1) web pages, with mid- or high informative (2 or 3) and interactive level (2 or 3).

⁸ According to Carlson & Strandberg (2005) the percentage of MEP personal websites in Finland was 28% in 1996 and 54% in 2004.

⁹ The Maltese cohort, whose relative weight in terms of MEPs is negligible, scored the highest rate (11th) in the group.

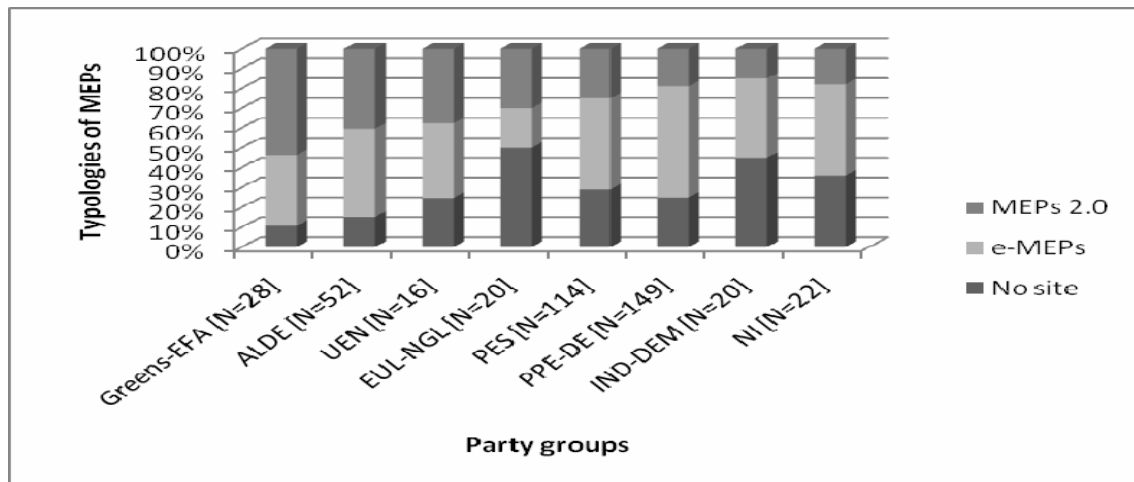
Figure 1. Diffusion of MEP personal websites in each national delegation in the 6th EP



Source: Own calculations.

A high level of variance also emerged when examining cross-party differences (see Figure 2). Overall, what clearly emerged is the gap between mainstream parties and radical or Eurosceptic ones. In this respect, the Greens dominated as the most wired group (with 89% of MEPs having a personal web page), followed by the Liberals (85%), EPP-ED (75%) and PES (71%), while MEPs affiliated with radical (EUL-NGL) or Eurosceptic (IND-DEM) parties had a website rate of 50% and 55%, respectively. A similar gap existed with non-affiliated MEPs, with only 64% of the sample having a personal web page. If we look at the qualitative features of the websites, the picture is slightly different. The Greens and Liberals not only presented the highest percentage of websites; but also the most relevant presence of sophisticated ones (54% and 40%, respectively). What is interesting is that non-mainstream parties UEN and EUL-NGL performed relatively well, at 38% and 30%, respectively, while the two major parties presented a very limited number of MEPs 2.0, at 25% (PES) and 19% (EPP-ED), respectively.

Figure 2. Cross-party distribution of MEP typologies in the 6th EP



Source: Own calculations.

3.2 Socio-demographic factors

Looking at the socio-demographic factors is highly revealing (see Appendix 2, Table A2.1). Age emerges as the most relevant explanatory factor. Older MEPs are less likely to have a personal web page and present, on average, less informative and interactive sites, which are frequently not updated. The most striking differences are found in the level of interactivity. While among the youngest group (30-39 years) 55% of the websites present highly interactive features, among the oldest group (over 70 years) this percentage falls to 17%. This evidence emerges as an indicator of very different communication styles, with younger MEPs keener to establish a bidirectional dialogue with their constituencies. When it comes to the sophistication of the ‘web tool’ adopted, the same trend emerges. While among the youngest parliamentarians the percentage of MEPs 2.0 was 49%, among the oldest the percentage was 17%. Looking at MEPs’ visual identity, older MEPs tend to favour European party logos over national ones.

Gender also has important implications. Interestingly, female MEPs appeared more likely to have a personal website than their male colleagues (82% vs. 69%); and when they had a website, it was, on average, more sophisticated and more frequently up to date. In this respect, the percentage of MEPs 2.0 among male MEPs was 24%, while it grows to 33% among female MEPs.

Education did not affect significantly most of the features analysed, with the notable exception of multilingualism. As MEPs’ level of education increased, the number of bilingual or multilingual websites also increased. Among the MEPs with ‘intermediate education’ the percentage of bilingual websites was 7% compared to 21% of those parliamentarians with a ‘postgraduate education’.

3.3 Country level factors

Being an MEP from a Mediterranean country seems to have a negative effect on the presence of personal web pages (see Appendix 2, Table A2.2). The percentage of non-wired MEPs varied between 27% (EP average) to 48%. Interestingly, in terms of visual identity, Mediterranean MEPs made wider use of flags, which were more likely to be European. This aspect might well suggest more favourable European sentiments among Mediterranean MEPs (and their voters). Most MEPs from Spain, Italy, Malta and Portugal did not have to cope with a significant Eurosceptic electorate, unlike their colleagues from other member states, such as the United Kingdom or Poland.¹⁰ Accordingly, 84% of the flagged ‘Mediterranean websites’ displayed the sole European standard, while only 50% of the British and 23% of the Polish presented the same feature. In the postcommunist countries symbols seem to matter more both for the MEPs and for their constituency. The Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states indeed appear more protective of their national identity and tend to express it through more frequent use of national symbols, preferring them to European ones.

MEPs from CEE, Scandinavia or the Baltic countries also tend to have – on average – more multilingual websites: 43% of the pages among CEE MEPs were bilingual, almost triple the average of our sample (15%). MEPs from smaller member states tended to have, on average, more bilingual and multilingual websites than their colleagues from the EU heavyweights (33% vs. 12%). It seems that the MEPs from the largest EU member states did not see as particularly

¹⁰ For further details on party-based Euroscepticism, see Taggart & Szcerbiak (2008).

profitable the use of multilingual Internet-based communication.¹¹ The presence of only one bilingual website¹² among the British seems to confirm this argument.

When it comes to the structural features of the websites, the explanatory potential of country-level factors tends to decrease. Interestingly, MEPs from CEE were less likely to use interactive and sophisticated platforms.

3.4 Partisan dimension

MEPs' partisan dimension emerged as highly revealing (see Appendix 2, Table A2.3). Looking at the representatives' 'visual identity', the variable 'left/right' was positively correlated with all the features considered. With a shift from 'left' to 'right' the average number of nationally flagged websites and of national party logos increases, that is, the appeal to national identity becomes stronger and it seems to reach its peak among nationalistic or Eurosceptic MEPs (from UEN and IND-DEM). While among left-leaning MEPs 96% of the *flagged* websites displayed only the European flag, among right-leaning MEPs the percentage was 33%. Similarly, the preference for national party logos reflected a lower attachment to the European parliamentary group and may also be an indicator of the weak structuration of the latter. The identity connotation of national symbols is also confirmed by the fact that both national flags and national party logos were less likely to be found among MEPs from mainstream parties than among rightist/radical ones (9% vs. 36% when it comes to logos).

The mainstream larger parties seem to rely more on new technologies than their smaller and less mainstream competitors, as reflected by the higher average number of websites, more frequently updated and sophisticated. This finding seems in line with parallel American trends.¹³

When it comes to the structural features of MEP websites, as we shifted from 'left' to 'right' the average number of sophisticated websites decreased, along with their informative level, degree of interactivity and frequency of updates. In this respect, it seems worth noting that in centre-left delegations 54% of the sample emerged as composed of MEPs 2.0, while among centre-right delegations the percentage fell to 19%. This result seems to suggest that MEPs affiliated with right-wing parties are less interested in the 'quality' of Internet-based communication; however, this 'more conservative' attitude in the use of Internet-based communication does not reduce remarkably their chances of having a personal web page.

3.5 Micro-/macro-electoral factors

A final set of factors addresses the impact of electoral dynamics on MEP Internet-based communication (see Appendix 2, Table A2.4). In terms of micro-level (individual) factors, being a first-timer seems to make the difference both in the features displayed by the websites and in legislators' attitudes towards multilingualism. The longer MEPs serve in Parliament, the less sophisticated their websites.¹⁴ In this respect, while among first-timers the percentage of

¹¹ For further details see European Commission (2006), "Europeans and their Languages" (PDF). *Special Eurobarometer* 243. Europa (web portal), pp. 141-154. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf. Retrieved on 19 January 2009.

¹² It is noteworthy that the second language is Welsh, considered a minority language.

¹³ D'Alessio (2000).

¹⁴ If we control for MEP age, while the intensity of the relationship decreases, the orientation of the coefficients (computed for *multilingualism* and *informative level*) does not change and the gap seems to persist. On the contrary, this operation severely reduces the reliability of *tenure* as a predictor of site sophistication, as the orientation of the correlation seems to vary according to MEP age.

MEPs 2.0 was 29%, among senior MEPs (with five or six mandates) the percentage was negligent.

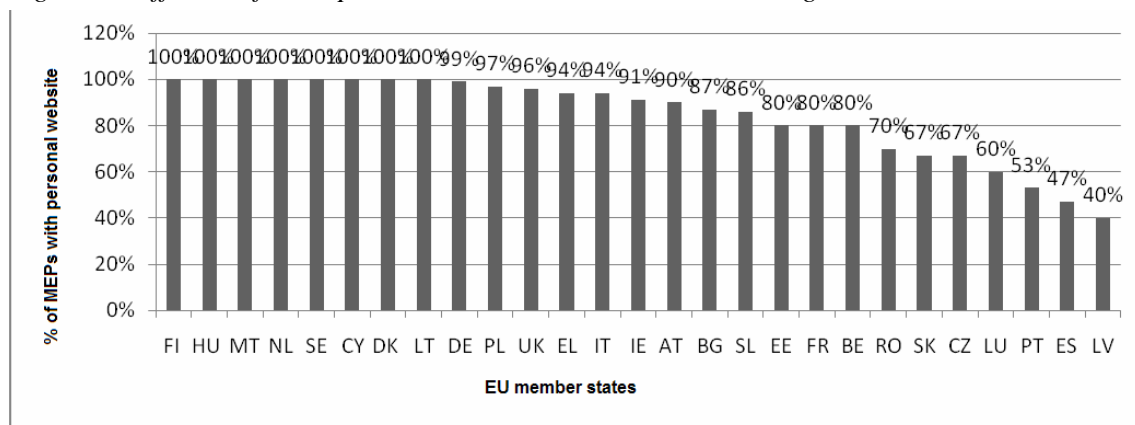
As for country-level electoral factors, the presence of party-centred electoral systems seemed to negatively affect the likelihood of MEPs going online (-10% if compared to candidate-centred systems). This seems to confirm a more general perception that systems with open ballots in local constituencies tend to favour candidate electoral activism more than central parties.

3.6 Recent developments: A quick look at the 7th EP

In this last empirical section we will briefly explore the most recent Internet-based communication developments in the current EP.¹⁵ The trend that emerged from the analysis of the 6th EP seems confirmed by the current EP and the diffusion of ‘web tools’ among MEPs has become the rule. MEPs without some sort of web page represent a clearly declining minority (14%) and are approaching extinction (-13 percentage points in comparison to the 6th EP).

On the whole, while in the previous Parliament the impact of the geographical dimension seemed relevant, in the current legislature some differences outlined in previous sections tend to disappear (see Figure 3). What emerges is a general trend towards greater diffusion of Internet-based communication. Almost every national delegation has experienced an increase in terms of Internet penetration and the number of 100%-wired delegations has increased from four to eight (including the Finnish, Hungarian, Maltese, Dutch, Swedish, Cypriot, Danish, and Latvian cohorts). Unlike in the preceding Parliament, several Mediterranean delegations emerge as the most wired, namely Cyprus and Malta (100%) and Greece and Italy (94%). Among the least wired delegations we still find the Portuguese and the Spanish¹⁶ (which, however, experienced an increase of 22 percentage points).

Figure 3. Diffusion of MEP personal websites in each national delegation in the 7th EP



Source: Own calculations.

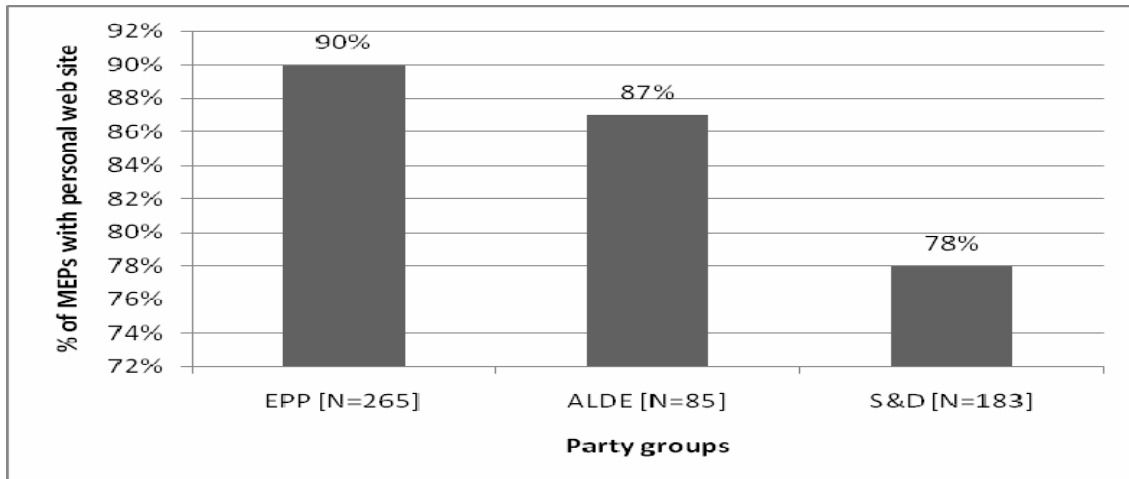
If we look at the distribution of individual web pages across the political groups, we see a widespread increase of web pages in all the groups considered (see Figure 4). The most impressive growth in terms of Internet penetration seems to have been experienced by the EPP group (+15%). The party of the Socialists and Democrats experienced more moderate growth of 7 percentage points, while the Liberal-Democrats appear somewhat stable (+3%). Needless to

¹⁵ The analysis includes only the three major parties: European People’s Party (EPP), the party of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the Liberal-Democrats (ALDE).

¹⁶ The Spanish anomaly is mostly due to the structurally low score of the Spanish socialists.

say, what has been presented in this last section represents only a preliminary look at the most recent developments.

Figure 4. Cross-party diffusion of MEP personal websites in the 7th EP



Source: Own calculations (EPP: <http://www.eppgroup.eu/links/en/members.asp>; S&D http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/gpes/public/linkhome.htm?section=NET&category=LINK&request_locale=EN; ALDE: <http://www.alde.eu/en/about-us/meps/>).

4. Final considerations

In the light of our analysis we can conclude that MEPs 2.0 appear to have invested significant resources to develop highly interactive platforms of communication. They provide a constant and ‘qualitatively high’ flow of information and involve voters and supporters by means of interactive e-fora or regular chat rooms.

In the eyes of the most active MEPs – who seem to represent a growing minority – this can be seen as a way to bypass traditional information channels, which are usually weak at the European level, and to establish a more direct dialogue with sectors of society more familiar with the web (Lusoli, 2005a). In an interview, one Italian MEP declared that “there is a structural limit which day after day puts in danger and weakens our inclusive efforts. To put it simply, 90% of our voters have no idea of our role in Brussels. They do not know what we do and what we deal with”.¹⁷ Another lamented that “on the whole, there is no connection at all. For most of the voters Europe doesn’t matter that much; they barely realise what the European elections are. For this reason, it is also difficult to establish such a connection. Nobody invites us to discuss and to present Europe at home”.¹⁸ For MEPs 2.0 the use of sophisticated and interactive tools may represent a practical way to escape this vicious circle and to establish and maintain a preferential (and relatively low-cost) link with their constituency.

Our figures show that while almost three-fourths of MEPs had some sort of personal ‘web tools’ in the past EP, when it comes to more qualitative aspects the picture blurs. On the one hand, we found a plurality of e-MEPs (47%) who consider Internet-based platforms as a sort of secondary tool; on the other hand, a minority of MEPs 2.0 (27%) clearly gives priority to Internet-based communication. The trend seems to have evolved towards higher Internet penetration in the current EP.

¹⁷ Author’s interview of an Italian MEP, 28 May 2008.

¹⁸ Author’s interview of an Italian MEP, 27 May 2008.

After testing a wide range of indicators, we observed that MEP attitudes towards Internet-based communication are influenced by a number of factors. Most of them seem personal (such as age, gender, education, parliamentary tenure or previous profession); however, macro- and country-level factors also proved to have a relevant impact. Both the communication styles and nature of vertical communication between elites and voters are influenced by MEPs' national settings. Both of the considered territorial dimensions (North-South and East-West) were found to play a significant role. Testing the relevance of specific territorial dimensions, we found, for instance, that MEPs from southern European or Mediterranean countries tend, on average, to rely less on Internet-based communication, whereas those from CEE countries seem to embrace a more traditional vision of e-politics (preponderance of e-MEPs), given the fact that their websites emerge as relatively less interactive and sophisticated. We believe that analysing these differences can shed light on features of vertical communication between elites and voters. This seems in line with what has been suggested by other previous studies. According to one study, "in countries, such as Portugal, the Web played a very minor role in the campaign; here, political campaigns are still undertaken with the tried and true tools employed in media strategies. The lines of division regarding incorporation of the Web into political campaigns seem oriented along the European north-south rather than the west-east axis".¹⁹

One of the most intriguing results of our analysis is the detection of a positive relationship between the existence of candidate-centred electoral systems and the presence of MEP individual websites. In this context, it seems more profitable for MEPs to have a personal website, as it tends to facilitate the maximisation of their electoral efforts. On the other hand, it seems no coincidence that most of the major parties in the systems characterised by greater party centrality tend to favour the collective portals of the national delegations at the expense of MEP individual websites. To summarise, we discovered that the 'quality' of the message is influenced not only by the messenger's individual characteristics, but also by his/her background and by the features of the environment in which he/she operates and competes to make his/her message heard.

In the light of these results it might be fruitful for still reluctant MEPs (or euro-candidates) operating in countries marked by candidate-centred electoral systems to embrace a more proactive attitude towards the Internet, given the relative low cost of becoming e-MEPs or even MEPs 2.0. The same investment might prove less profitable for politicians operating in party-centred environments.

A second factor which might prove relevant is paying greater attention to the nature and expectations of the 'electorate of reference' in terms of *demand* and *offer*. In this respect, those MEPs whose 'privileged electorate' is composed by relatively young voters characterised by strong Internet penetration and familiarity with e-tools and social networking might find it more profitable to develop sophisticated and interactive tools. The same arguments might prove true for those parties whose electorate appears more postmaterialist, typically the Greens or the new alternative left. Politicians addressing primarily traditional and relatively older electorates might find this shift unnecessary, unless they intend to extend their electorate beyond traditional borders. These arguments seem to be even more relevant when we look at the most recent developments in the current EP, given the constant trend towards greater penetration and quality of Internet-based communication. The next step will be increased interaction by MEPs not only through their personal web pages, but also through social media, such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube.

¹⁹ Jankowski, Foot, Kluver & Schneider (2005, p. 171).

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Appendix 1. Methodological note

1. The dependent variables: operationalisation and coding

The first factor registered is the existence of a personal web page. The variable is dichotomous and coded as follows: absence (0), presence (1).

A further distinction concerns the type of site chosen. The variable ‘type of site’ is dichotomous and has been coded as follows: basic web pages (0), sophisticated and flexible websites and/or highly interactive Internet-based platforms²⁰ (1).

The assessment of the content of the websites has been conducted according to standardised and systematised criteria. The method of analysis chosen is twofold. On the one hand, we looked at the degree of information channelled by the websites; on the other hand, we addressed the way the information flow was conveyed.

The variable ‘Information’ is ordinal and coded as follows: low informative (1), somewhat informative (2), very informative (3).²¹

The variable ‘interactivity’ is ordinal and coded as follows: little interaction (1), somewhat interactive (2), very interactive (3).²²

One final variable addressing the informative nature of the websites concerns the updating process. The variable ‘update’ is dichotomous and has been coded as follows: dated (0), recently updated (1).

The variable ‘multilingualism’ is ordinal and coded as follows: only national language (1), national language and one foreign language (2), national language and two or more foreign languages (3). Regional and minority languages were coded as follows: national language and minority language (89), national language, minority language, and one or more foreign languages (99).

The variable ‘logo’²³ has therefore an ordinal nature and is coded as follows: European party logo (1), both European and national party logos (2), national party logo (3). The category ‘absence of both logos’ has been assigned code 99 and has been excluded from the analysis.

The variable ‘flag1’ is dichotomous and it registers the absence (0) or presence of a flag (1). The variable ‘flag2’ is ordinal and coded as follows: European flag (1), both European and national flags (2), national flag (3).

²⁰ Such as the most common social networks (i.e. Facebook or MySpace).

²¹ The sites providing only personal information (CV, political career, publications, etc.) were classified as “low informative”. Those sites including extensive references to MEP political activity (speeches, proposals, articles, press releases, etc.) and sporadic posts and messages to the audience were classified as “somewhat informative”. Those providing deep and regular coverage of MEP activity (written documents, as above, video clips and audio files) and regular and frequent communication with the constituency were classified as “very informative”.

²² Accordingly, web pages providing only contact details (phone, email address, office address) were classified as “little interaction”. Those providing the possibility to post direct comments to the articles were classified as “somewhat interactive”. Finally, those websites also containing structured platforms for collective discussion (i.e. web fora or chat rooms) and/or links to highly interactive social networks (i.e. MySpace or Facebook) were classified as “very interactive”.

²³ This variable addresses the absence or presence of a “European visual dimension”.

Table A1.1 Presentation of the dependent variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Operationalisation</i>
Existence of personal web page	Absence (0), presence (1)
Type of site	Basic web page (0), sophisticated web page (1)
Information	Low informative (1), somewhat informative (2), very informative (3)
Interactivity	Little interaction (1), somewhat interactive (2), very interactive (3)
Update	Dated (0), recently updated (1)
Multilinguism	National language (1), national language + one foreign language (2), national language + two or more foreign languages (3), national language and minority language (89), national language, minority language + one or more foreign languages (99)
Logo	European party logo (1), both European and national party logos (2), national party logo (3), absence of both logos (99)
Flag1	absence (0) , presence (1)
Flag2	European flag (1), both European and national flags (2), national flag (3)

2. Control factors

While gender is dichotomous, MEP age and education are categorical ordinal and respectively range from ‘30-39yrs’ (1) to ‘70-100yrs’ (5) and from ‘elementary school’ (1) to ‘postgraduate education’ (4).

All the country-level variables are dichotomous. The first variable ‘postcommunist country’ addresses the existence of an East-West divide. ‘Country size’ addresses different styles of communication between smaller member states and EU heavyweights. Two variables are introduced in order to capture the effect of regional diversity across the EU: ‘MEPs from Mediterranean countries’ and ‘MEPs from Scandinavian or Baltic countries’.

Two variables addressing MEP partisanship have been created. The former measures the impact of MEP partisan affiliation. The left/right divide has been measured on a five-point scale, ranging from Left (1) to Right (5), with respect to MEP partisan affiliation in the 6th EP.²⁴ The second variable, type of party, distinguishes between mainstream parties (1) and so-called ‘niche/fringe/eurosceptic parties’ (0), irrespective of their left/right orientation.²⁵

As for the electoral factors, at the individual level we looked at MEPs’ past political career and their parliamentary tenure.²⁶ The former is a dichotomous variable and is coded as follows: party official (1), other (0). Parliamentary tenure ranges from ‘1st EP mandate’ (1) to ‘6th EP

²⁴ Respectively, European United Left-Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL) and European Greens-European Free Alliance (EG-EFA) have been classified as left (1), the Party of European Socialists (PES) has been classified as centre-left (2), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) has been classified as centre (3), the European People’s Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED) has been classified as centre-right (4), and Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), Independence/Democracy (IND/DEM), and Non-Inscrits (NI) have been classified as right (5).

²⁵ The European People’s Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED), the Party of European Socialists (PES), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and the European Greens-European Free Alliance (EG-EFA) have been categorised as mainstream parties (1), while the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL), Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), Independence/Democracy (IND/DEM) and Non-Inscrits (NI) have been classified as “niche parties” (0).

²⁶ Source: CIRCaP archive of parliamentary careers.

mandate' (6). At the macro-level we categorised member state electoral institutions.²⁷ The variable 'open lists' is dichotomous and coded as follows: absence of open lists (0), presence of open lists (1); the index 'party centrality' ranges from 'highly candidate-centred' (0) to 'highly party-centred' (1).

Table A1.2 Presentation of the independent variables

<i>Set of variables</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Operationalisation</i>
Socio-demographic	Gender	Male (1), female (2)
	Age	From '30-39yrs' (1) to '70-100yrs' (5)
	Education	From 'elementary school' (1) to 'postgraduate education' (4)
Country-level	Postcommunist country	No (0), yes (1)
	Country size	Small (0), big (1)
	Mediterranean	No (0), yes (1)
	Scandinavian-Baltic country	No (0), yes (1)
Partisanship	Left/right divide	From Left (1) to Right (5)
	Type of party	Mainstream party (1), fringe party (0)
Individual electoral factors	Past political career	Party official (1), other (0)
	Parliamentary tenure	From '1 st EP mandate' (1) to '6 th EP mandate' (6)
Macro-level electoral factors	Open lists	Absence (0), presence (1)
	Party centrality	From 'highly candidate-centred' (0) to 'highly party-centred' (1)

²⁷ EU member states have been classified as follows: Closed lists and nation-wide constituency (EE, DE, HU, GR and ES), closed lists and more electoral districts (IT, FR and UK), ordered lists and nation-wide constituency (LV, SE, CZ, SK, CY, AT, NL and PT), ordered and more electoral districts (BE and PL), preferences and nation-wide constituency (LT, SI, LU, MT, FI and DK), single transferable vote and more electoral districts (IE). Member state electoral regulations were retrieved from the EP website. For further details see http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/index_en.html.

Appendix 2

Note of caution: In case of high and significant correlation between two independent variables included in the model, all the coefficients presented in the study (Spearman's *R*) were controlled accordingly. In all the cases discussed in the paper the orientation of the original correlation did not change, while presenting satisfactory levels of significance, unless explicitly mentioned in the text.

Table A2.1 Socio-demographic factors

		Gender	Age	Education
<i>Website</i>	Yes / No	.134**	-.140**	-.041
<i>Visual identity</i>	Logos	-.021	-.108*	-.074
	Flag	-.094	.002	.098
	Flag (Yes / No)	-.064	.101*	-.027
<i>Multilinguism / Audience</i>	Languages	.048	-.019	.205**
<i>Features of the website</i>	Type of website	.113*	-.094	.020
	Informative level	.093	-.149**	-.012
	Interactivity	.038	-.168**	.018
	Update	.107*	-.181**	.061

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

Table A2.2 Country level factors

		Postcommunist country	Country size	Mediterranean country	Scandinavia or Baltic country
<i>Website</i>	Yes / No	.108*	-.027	-.271**	.000
<i>Visual identity</i>	Logos	-.037	-.027	.065	-.162**
	Flag	.351**	.006	-.199*	.270**
	Flag (Yes / No)	.078	.058	.118*	-.062
<i>Multilinguism / Audience</i>	Languages	.363**	-.253**	-.092	.196**
<i>Features of the website</i>	Type of website	-.036	-.127*	-.009	.082
	Informative level	-.032	.009	.055	.010
	Interactivity	-.156**	-.031	.022	-.003
	Update	.048	-.130*	-.078	-.016

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

Table A2.3 Partisan dimension

		Left-right divide	Type of party (mainstream / niche)
<i>Website</i>	Yes / No	-.007	.142**
<i>Visual identity</i>	Logos	.227**	-.229**
	Flag	.371**	-.216*
	Flag (Yes / No)	.143**	-.024
<i>Multilinguism / Audience</i>	Languages	.001	.026
<i>Features of the website</i>	Type of website	-.125*	.051
	Informative level	-.112*	.026
	Interactivity	-.134**	.036
	Update	-.229**	.100*

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

Table A2.4 Individual and country-level electoral factors

		Previous career	Tenure	Open lists	Electoral institutions
<i>Website</i>	Yes / No	-.017	.026	.085*	-.107**
<i>Multilinguism / Audience</i>	Languages	-.098*	-.245**	.099*	.118*
<i>Features of the website</i>	Type of website	-.029	-.120*	.004	.020
	Informative level	.048	-.108*	.003	.046
	Interactivity	-.049	-.008	.055	-.020
	Update	-.100*	-.012	.044	.083

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

Since 2005, an EPIN Steering Committee takes the most important decisions. Currently there are six member institutes: CEPS, DIIS (Denmark), ELCANO (Spain), HIIA (Hungary), Notre Europe (France) and SIEPS (Sweden).

Status quo

Currently there are 30 EPIN members from 26 countries, also from countries outside of the EU. The 'hard core' work of the network is based on the cooperation of about 10 most active institutes. The member institutes are quite diverse in size and structure, but are all characterised by political independence and the absence of any predetermined point of view or political affiliation.

EPIN organises two major conferences in Brussels per year; as well as ad hoc conferences or other activities in member states. The network publishes Working Paper Series and other papers, which primarily focus on institutional reform of the Union. The network follows preparations for the European elections, the EU's communication policy, and the political dynamics after enlargement, as well as EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs.

Achievements

EPIN is a network that offers its member institutes the opportunity to contribute to the 'European added-value' for researchers, decision-makers and citizens. The network provides a unique platform for researchers and policy analysts to establish personal links, exchange knowledge and collaborate on EU-related issues. Members bring their national perspectives to bear on the issues tackled and through collaboration they contribute to establish a 'European added-value' (e.g. on EU communication, flexible integration). By doing so they strengthen a common European dimension in the national debates on Europe.



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