

MEPs 2.0? EUROPARLIAMENTARIANS TALKING TO VOTERS IN THE INTERNET ERA

Stefano Braghiroli*

Abstract: *This paper systematically looks at the nature of MEPs' internet-based "web tools" in the past EP legislature and at the extent to which their features reflect the complex nature of the EP environment ("Europeanization of communication"). To conduct this operation, a variety of structural and graphic features of MEPs' websites have been identified, which have been made statistically analyzable, following a process of standardization and categorization, and were finally collected into a unique dataset. The preliminary figures obtained have been then controlled for a wide array of pluri-dimensional factors, operating both at micro-/individual-level and at macro-/country-level. Conceived as an explorative study towards clearer and more accurate understanding of MEPs' internet-based communication styles and political strategies, our analysis aims at providing a stepping stone for further investigation in this direction.*

Keywords: *e-politics, electoral communication, European Parliament, interactivity, MEPs*

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"Were it not for the internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee."

Arianna Huffington, quoted by *Huffington Post* (January 9, 2009)

I. Introduction

The use of new interactive technologies is increasingly characterizing horizontal political competition (among the elites) and vertical political communication (between elites and voters) (Blondel 2005; Higley and Pakulski 2007). In particular, candidates' personal websites have become a common feature of the electoral campaigns and have grown both in number and sophistication. The options available to candidates range

from simple web-pages to extremely interactive platforms aimed at favouring information exchange between candidate and voters. The reason behind this growing trend seems twofold: growing maximization of candidates' electoral efforts and their willingness to get/keep in touch with their constituency once elected.

A good example of successful use of the web has been provided by the US presidential elections. The wide use of interactive participatory tools during the electoral

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campaign has played a significant role in the success of the democratic candidate. These non-standard forms of political communication seemed to have effectively targeted and mobilized large social strata usually disconnected from politics. The creation of the platform *my.barackobama.com* coordinated millions of supporters and provided them with a connection with the candidate.

In Europe, and in particular at the EU level, the phenomenon of internet-based political communication appears less developed; however there are clear indicators showing a rapid growth. On the eve of the 2009 European elections, the Party of the European Socialists (PES) launched the initiative “Your manifesto”: an open consultation on its electoral manifesto¹. A draft manifesto was developed on the basis of the consultation, and discussed within the PES. The manifesto² was adopted by the plenum of the party in December 2008.

At the European level, not only the awareness of the public is generally limited, but also scholarly interest seems focused on other – more traditional – dimensions of politics, both in the European Parliament (EP) and outside it. As a consequence, web-politics of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) still emerges as a relatively unexplored ground. To what extent is the general trend towards innovation of political strategies affecting MEPs’ electoral communication? Is it possible to identify common trends in this respect?

The present article has the ambition to address these aspects. In the following sections we will assess the nature of the link between the features of the message conveyed and of the strategies of the

messenger in the 6th EP. The multi-national nature of the EP makes it a perfect laboratory to address the determinants of MEPs’ communication strategies.

To conduct our study, a wide array of structural and graphic features of representatives’ websites have been identified and analysed. Finally, once standardized and categorized, our data have been collected into a unique dataset. The descriptive figures emerged have been controlled for a variety of multi-dimensional factors (both of micro-/individual and macro-/country-level nature).

Conceived as an exploratory analysis towards a more precise understanding of MEPs’ internet-based communication, our study seems to represent a stepping stone for further investigation in the field. For this reason, we will not propose a formal set of hypotheses to test.

The article proceeds as follows: after discussing the most relevant studies in the field (section II), we will describe the nature of our data and the operationalization of our set of dependent variables and control factors (section III). We will then explore the results of our analysis and discuss the relevance of our findings (section IV). The final part of the article will discuss the broader implications of our results and will develop some concluding arguments which seem to provide room for further research (section V).

II. Helpful insights from the literature

A growing number of empirical studies (Bimber 1998; Bimber and Davis 2003; Foot and Schneider 2002; Jankowski and van Selm 2000; Schneider and Foot

¹ According to the organizers the consultation involved more than 300,000 visitors, 500 posts, 100 videos. Additionally, more than 3,000 activists joined the website of the initiative [<http://elections2009.pes.org>] during the process.

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

2002) have systematically explored the polymorphous relationship between the rise of new technologies and politics, adopting different theoretical perspectives and looking at the actors involved. When looking at the impact of new technologies on vertical political communication we can – broadly speaking – distinguish between those contributions focused on the demand-side of the relationship (voters) and those interested on the supply-side (political entrepreneurs). Given the objectives of this study we will necessarily focus on the latter.

Here parties or collective political actors' strategies of communication are addressed (Gibson and Ward 1998; Gibson, Ward, and Nixon 2003; Ward 2005). However, a number of contributions also include governmental actors, NGOs, civic groups (Delli Carpini 2000; Jennings and Zeitner 2003). Some studies, focusing on the US, categorize a variety of features provided on political websites, links to other political sites and opportunities for political participation, both online and offline (Foot and Schneider 2002; Klinenberg and Perrin 2000). Other research concludes that political sites consist of little more than online versions of offline material (Kamarck 1999). Schneider and Larsen (2000) find a prevalence of such material in their analysis of the websites for the eight major candidates in the 2000 US Presidential election.

A growing number of contributions look at how politicians are using the Internet with survey data and content analysis of political party websites (Gibson and Ward 1998; Ward and Gibson 2003). Communication politics is not "as usual", but changes seem slow to come. In his analysis of MPs' email correspondence as a tool of political communication, Jackson (2003, 20) concludes that "there appears to be a perception that email is not a vote-winner: the seats which are likely to be

more closely contested are not significantly more attuned to using email political campaigning. The only two factors which may influence whether an MP deliberately employs a relationship marketing strategy are institutional factors and Party affiliation". An earlier study on the 2000 US election found that female candidates benefit from the total control they can exert on website presentation of their image and contents (Banwart and Kaid 2002). However, most evidence suggests that online campaigning increasingly reflects the assets and disparities of off-line campaigning, thus favouring candidates' from bigger (and usually wealthier) parties rather than candidates in general (D'Alessio 2000).

This field of analysis generally focuses on the structure of parties' websites or, alternatively, on the content of their message, while neglecting more blurred and less directly identifiable features of vertical political communication. Lusoli's work represents a notable exception. He assumes interactivity to be a key dimension in the study of parties' e-campaigns: "Interactivity matters. It influences participants' perception of candidates as well as their levels of agreement with their policy positions. [...] the number of candidates offering interactivity and the range of services – e-mail feedback, online discussion boards, blogs – have expanded over time in many western democracies" (Lusoli 2005a, 155).

On the whole, two limits seem to reduce the *fungibility* of these studies. Most of them are single-country analyses focused on parties, rather than candidates' websites. Additionally, even when the focus is on candidates' internet-based communication the set of the explanatory factors considered appear frequently limited to socio-demographic factors.

Before concluding this section, it is worth spending a few words on a handful of studies

analysing candidates' e-campaign during the 2004 EP elections (Carlson and Strandberg 2005; Lusoli 2004; Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneiderd 2005; Ward 2005). Given the scope of our analysis, these contributions emerge as highly profitable for shaping our successive analytical steps.

These studies relied on a common dataset collected within the framework of the Internet & Elections project³. Prior to the EP election, a random sample of 100 sites was drawn from the population of sites identified in each country, stratified across producer types to ensure inclusion of a mix of website types for coding. Quotas were set as follows: 30% for candidates' sites, 20% for parties, 10% for governmental sites, 10% for NGOs and labour unions, and the rest distributed across other producer types. The sites have been then categorized according to a set of 24 measures (including indicators of sites' informative level and engagement potential⁴). Finally the results have been controlled for country-level factors (such as one member state's GDP, population, index of democracy).

Looking overall at the eleven EU countries included, the authors suggest that "candidates and parties were the most dominant political actors in the EP electoral Web spheres. [...] Where the Web does play a role, that role is primarily related to provision of information related to aspects of the election and only in a minor manner do political actors of any ideological calling provide opportunities for political discussion and action" (Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneiderd 2005, 171). They also found

relevant cross-country variance in the average number of websites and the emergence of a gap between Northern and Mediterranean member states: "in other 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" (Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneiderd 2005, 171). In their analysis of the Finnish case, Carlson and Strandberg (2005, 194) found a clear prevalence of traditional one-way communication: "the candidates and the parties, on the other hand, provided a richer variety of information on their sites, providing biographies, calendars and issue positions. Beyond this, the sites to a certain degree used the virtual expanse of the web by providing speeches and audio/video files".

With an eye on the arguments touched in this section, two basic questions seem relevant for our analysis: How does the phenomenon of internet-based political communication vary both quantitatively and qualitatively? Which factors can explain this variance? In this respect, our research seems to have potential for innovation in two different directions. It represents the first cross-country attempt including a relevant number of MEPs' websites (with an exclusive focus on the supply-side). On the other hand, it addresses still relatively unexplored dimensions of vertical political communication, such as interactivity,

³ The Internet & Elections project involved researchers from eleven EU countries, old and new. They examined the online structure of political communications, the amount and nature of electoral information supplied, and the engagement opportunities provided through the internet by different political actors during the EP election campaign. For further details see <http://oase.uci.kun.nl/~jankow/elections/>

⁴ They included also some graphic features of the websites, such as the presence/absence of e-paraphernalia (banners and screensavers).

multilinguism, and MEPs' "visual identity". It also embraces a more diversified array of explanatory factors (both micro-individual and macro).

III. Identifying MEPs 2.0

1. *The dataset*

Our analysis is based on an original dataset created by the author and collected between January and February 2009. The primary aim behind the creation of the dataset was to attempt a categorization of MEPs' personal websites (in the 2004–2009 period) according to straightforward and fixed criteria. The primary aim behind the creation of the dataset was to attempt a categorization of MEPs' personal websites according to straightforward and fixed criteria. The primary aim behind the creation of the dataset was to attempt a categorization of MEPs' personal websites according to straightforward and fixed criteria. The definition of fixed and clear criteria of classification represented a key challenge. Given the nature of the EP, this meant that we had to deal with different national traditions and (at least) nineteen different languages.

Our primary goal has been therefore to define classification criteria which were not subject to contextual changes. Our study therefore focused more on the "observational side of the analysis", than on a content-based assessment of MEPs' websites. The data collection process was based on a systematic and standardized codification of a number

of clearly identifiable characteristics of the websites⁵.

A further caveat has been considered in the selection process. Only individual web-pages have been included in the dataset⁶. This further distinction grants a degree of personal involvement of the MEPs in the management and development of their websites. All the national delegations (with the exclusion of the Romanian and Bulgarian ones) have been considered. A sample of 422 randomly-selected MEPs has been selected and 309 individual web-pages have been counted⁷.

2. *The dependent variables: operationalization and coding*

The first set of variables of the dataset addresses the nature of MEP's website. First, we registered the *existence of a personal web-page*. The variable is dichotomous and coded as follows: absence (0), presence (1). A further distinction regards the *type of site*. We identified a wide range of solutions adopted: blogs, social networks, simple or complex web-pages, etc. We suppose that the degree of complexity of the "web tool" chosen by an MEP and the way she/he decides to interact with his/her constituency matters and might affect the nature of the message conveyed. The variable "type of site" is dichotomous and captures the level of sophistication of the "web tool". It has been coded as follows: basic web-pages (0), sophisticated and flexible websites and/or highly interactive internet-based platforms⁸ (1).

⁵ For further details see Schneider and Foot, Online structure for political action: Exploring presidential campaign Web sites from the 2000 American election, *Javnost – The Public* 9(2) (2002), 43–60.

⁶ Collective web-pages of the national delegations or MEPs' personal sections in the parties' official websites have been therefore systematically excluded.

⁷ The sampling operation was conducted on the universe of MEPs and not on the universe of websites. The number of sampled MEPs per country is respectively: Austria (7), Belgium (15), Denmark (5), Finland (8), France (44), Germany (57), Greece (9), Ireland (9), Italy (34), Luxembourg (3), Netherlands (20), Portugal (14), Spain (35), Sweden (11), United Kingdom (57), Czech Republic (11), Estonia (2), Cyprus (5), Latvia (5), Lithuania (10), Hungary (15), Malta (5), Poland (24), Slovenia (4), Slovakia (11), MEPs elected in different countries (2).

⁸ Such as the most common social networks (i.e. Facebook or MySpace).

The assessment of the content of the websites followed standardized and systematized criteria. In this respect, a clear distinction is required. First, we looked at the informative level of the websites. Second, we looked at the way the information flow is conveyed. The variable "*Information*" is ordinal and coded as follows: low informative level (1), medium informative level (2), and high informative level (3). Web-pages providing only basic information (CV, political career, publications, etc.) fell in the first category. Those providing details concerning MEPs' activity (speeches, proposals, press releases, etc.) and sporadic posts were classified as "somewhat informative". Finally, those providing an in-depth coverage of the MEPs' activity (written documents, as above, but also video clips and audio files) and regular communication with the constituency were classified as "highly informative".

We included a specific dimension addressing *interactivity*. We observed whether, and to what extent, the information flow is unidirectional or bi-directional. Here we aim at assessing the concrete possibility for the users to provide some kind of feedback (bi-directional information flow). This feature clearly touches upon the purpose of the "web tool". On the one hand, it might be thought just to inform the users; on the other hand, it might represent a way to establish some kind of participatory dialogue with them; the latter implying higher accountability. The variable "*interactivity*" is ordinal and coded as follows: low interactive level (1), medium interactive level (2), high interactive level (3). Web-pages providing only contact details (phone, email address, etc.) fell in the first category. Those providing the possibility for the users to post comments were classified as displaying a "medium interactive level". Finally, those websites displaying also web-fora or chat-rooms and/or links to interactive

social networks were classified as "very interactive".

An additional variable concerning the informative nature of the web-pages concerns the updating process. It represents an indicator of MEPs' degree of present involvement in the management of his/her website. It might well be that one website *presents* highly informative and interactive features, but, it lags behind in terms of updating process. The variable "*update*" is dichotomous and has been coded as follows: dated (0), recently updated (1).

The variable "*multi-linguism*" deserves discourse apart. Given the very nature of the EP, we expect to find some relevant reasons behind one MEP's choice to develop sections of his/her website in an language, other than his/her national language, as this choice implies additional costs for the developer. Often languages have a strong identitarian connotation, as in the case of regional or minority languages such as Euskara in the Basque Countries or Hungarian in Romania. Beyond minority languages, the decision to develop sections of a website in one or more foreign languages might be related to MEPs' idea of constituency (Europeanization of communication). The variable "*multilinguism*" 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 or minority languages are coded as follows: national language and minority language (89), national language, minority language, and one or more foreign languages (99).

A distinct set of variables addresses what we label as MEPs' "*visual identity*". The assumption behind our choice is that symbols matter. We focused on two basic features clearly identifiable in all MEPs' websites: party logos and flags. We included in our categorization national party logos

and European party logos. The absence/presence of one or the other might well mirror concrete implications in terms of loyalty and legitimation. The variable “*logo*” has an ordinal nature and is coded as follows: European party logo (1), both European and national party logos (2), national party logo (3)⁹. A second dimension addresses the absence/presence of national and/or European flags. Two variables were created. The variable “*flag1*” is ordinal and coded as follows: European flag (1), both European and national flags (2), national flag (3). The variable “*flag2*” is dichotomous as it only registers the absence (0) or presence of a flag (1), be it national or European.

3. Control factors

Four sets of control factors have been considered. The first include standard socio-demographic features: gender, age, and education. While *gender* is dichotomous, MEPs’ *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).

A second group of variables addresses country-level factors. These macro aspects may explain cross country differences. All the variables included are dichotomous. A variable “*post-communist country*” has been developed to catch relevant differences in MEPs’ communication strategies between Western Europe (WE) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Another dimension generally

assumed as revealing is “*country size*”. MEPs’ from the so-called EU heavyweights may show different communication styles. We believe that different cultural backgrounds may influence one’s behaviour and attitudes. In line with this assumption, two other variables are tested, addressing regional diversity across the EU: “*MEPs from Mediterranean countries*” and “*MEPs from Scandinavian or Baltic countries*” (cfr. Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneider 2005).

A set of control factors addresses the effect of partisanship on MEPs’ communication styles. Two variables are proposed. The former measures the impact of MEPs’ ideological connotation. and t and t and tThe *left/right divide* has been measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from Left (1) to Right (5)¹⁰. The second variable distinguishes between mainstream parties (1) and “niche-fringe parties” (0), regardless of their left/right orientation¹¹.

The last set of control variables deals with electoral factors (both at the macro and micro level). At the individual level we considered MEPs’ *past political career and parliamentary tenure*. Political career is dichotomous and is coded as follows: party official (1), other (0). Tenure measures MEPs’ seniority and is of ordinal nature, ranging from “1st EP mandate” (1) to “6th EP mandate” (6). This dimension is thought to catch the impact of parliamentary socialization on communication styles.

⁹ The category “absence of both logos” has been assigned code 99 and has been excluded from the analysis.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ 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 categorized 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).

At the macro level we looked at the presence of “open lists” and at the level of personal involvement of the Eurocandidates in the electoral campaign vis-à-vis their “party in central office” in the electoral campaign vis-à-vis their “party in central office” (Carey and Shugart 1995; Mitchell 2000). The variable “open lists” is dichotomous and coded as follows: absence of open lists (0), presence of open lists (1). The assessment of candidates’ *liberté de manoeuvre* relies on two indicators: size of the electoral districts and, again, openness of the electoral lists. According to Faas (2003) and Bowler and Farrel (1993) a candidate-based system with open ballot gives the candidate a high degree of independence; whereas a party-based system based on closed lists clearly reduces candidates’ role vis-à-vis the party. These factors may clearly affect MEPs’ willingness to “go on-line” (Carlson and Strandberg 2005). To categorize member states’ electoral specificities we adopted

an index of “party centrality” ranging from “highly candidate-centred” (0) to “highly party-centred” (1).

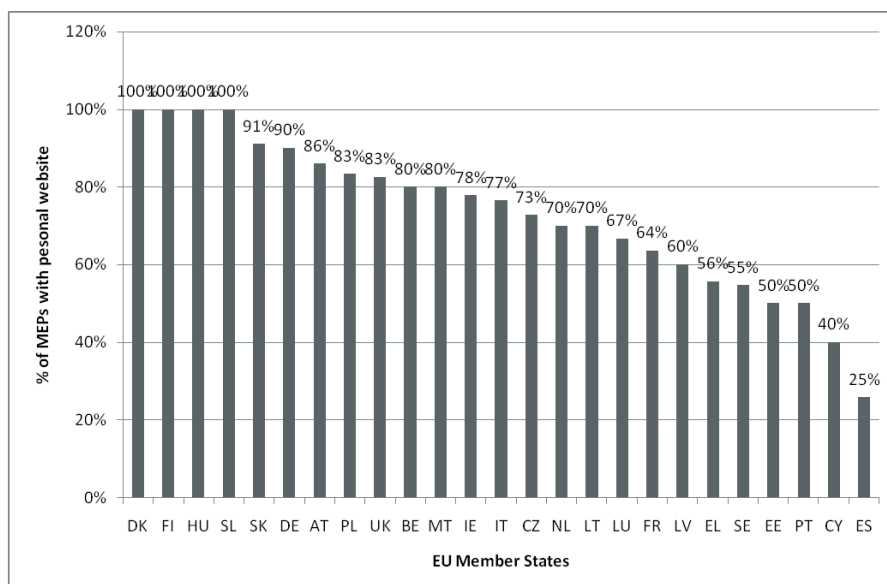
IV. Findings

This section discusses the results of our analysis. Our analysis presents two successive steps. First, we assess cross-country differences in terms of MEPs’ internet-based political communication. Then, using correlation, we assess the nature of the relationship between our set of dependent variables and the explanatory factors.

1. A general picture: Cross-country variance

Figure 1 summarizes the penetration of web-based communication. 73.2% of the MEPs have some sort of internet-based platform. In this respect, we can notice a high degree of cross-country variance (st.

FIGURE 1. Diffusion of MEPs’ personal websites in the EU member states



Source: Own calculation

dev. = .443). Partially confirming Lusoli's results (2005b), all the Danish, Finnish¹², Hungarian, and Slovenian MEPs included in our analysis (29 units) have some sort of "web tool". On the other hand, the MEPs from the Mediterranean countries seem to lag a little behind. First, none of the Mediterranean national delegations is ranked among the first ten highest scoring delegations. Second, three Mediterranean countries, (Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain) present the lowest number of web-pages¹³ (cfr. Jankowski, Foot, Kluver, and Schneider 2005). It seems however quite difficult to identify a clear rationale behind these preliminary results.

2. Socio-demographic factors

Like in previous studies, socio-demographic factors prove highly revealing. Age towers among the most relevant explanatory factor (see Table 1). The significant coefficients confirm the existence of a negative correlation between "age" and the structural features of the websites. The

older MEPs are less likely to have a personal web-page (Spear. R = -.140). In addition, their pages are on average, less informative (Spear. R = -.149) and interactive (Spear. R = -.168) and frequently not updated (Spear. R = -.181). While among the youngest cohort (30-39yrs) 54.8% of the websites present highly interactive features, among the oldest group (70-100yrs) this percentage falls to 16.7%. This suggests that the younger cohorts of MEPs are keener to establish a bi-directional dialogue with the constituency.

Gender has also important implications. Female MEPs seem more likely to have a personal website than their male colleagues (Spear. R = .134); and their sites are on average, more sophisticated (Spear. R = .113) and more frequently update (Spear. R = .107). The gap between women and men in terms of web-pages diffusion equals 12.6 percentage points (69.3% vs. 81.9%).

Quite surprisingly, education does not present any significant correlation with most of the dependent variables analyzed, with the

Table 1. Socio-demographic factors

		Gender	Age	Education
Website	Yes / No	.134**	-.140**	-.041
Visual identity	Logos	-.021	-.108*	-.074
	Flag	-.094	.002	.098
	Flag (Yes / No)	-.064	.101*	-.027
Multilinguism / Audience	Languages	.048	-.019	.205**
Features of the website	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.

¹² According to Carlson and Strandberg (2005) the percentage of MEPs' personal websites was 28% in 1996 and 54% in 2004.

¹³ In particular, the case of Spain is striking: on average, only one out of four MEPs (less than 26%) has an individual web-page.

only, nonetheless very relevant, exception of multilinguism (Spear. $R = .205$). As MEPs' level of education increases, the likelihood of encountering bi-lingual or multi-lingual websites also increases. If we shift from "intermediate education" to "post-graduate education", the percentage of bi-lingual websites increases from 6.7% to 21%.

3. Country level factors

As supposed above, table 2 shows Mediterranean MEPs are less likely to have personal web-pages (Spear. $R = -.271$). Quite interestingly, they also make wider use of flags (Spear. $R = .118$), especially European ones (Spear. $R = -.199$). The presence of European standards among the Mediterraneans reflects a clear state of things: MEPs from Spain, Italy, Malta, or Portugal do not have to cope with a relevant Euroskeptic electorate, unlike British or Polish MEPs. Accordingly, 84% of the *flagged*

"Mediterranean websites" display the sole European standard, while respectively only 50% and 23% of the latter present the same feature. On the other hand, Scandinavian and Baltic MEPs tend to favour – along with nationally flagged websites (Spear. $R = .270$) – the use of European party logos (Spear. $R = -.162$). The positive coefficient displayed by post-communist countries (Spear. $R = .351$) might suggest that the recently enfranchised Member states appear more attached to their national identity, as witnessed by a more frequent use of national symbols vis-à-vis the European ones.

Being MEPs from CEE, Scandinavia or Baltic countries also positively correlate with the existence of multi-lingual websites (Spear. R equals .363 and .196). In particular, the percentage of bi-lingual pages among the MEPs from CEE equals 42.6%, more than 27 percentage points higher than the average of our sample (15.4%). On the contrary,

Table 2. Country level factors

		Post-communist country	Country size	Mediterranean country	Scandinavia or Baltic country
Website	Yes / No	.108*	-.027	-.271**	.000
Visual identity	Logos	-.037	-.027	.065	-.162**
	Flag	.351**	.006	-.199*	.270**
	Flag (Yes / No)	.078	.058	.118*	-.062
Multilinguism / Audience	Languages	.363**	-.253**	-.092	.196**
Features of the website	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.

¹⁴ 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.

country size appears negatively correlated with multilingualism (Spear. $R = -.253$). Our results suggest that MEPs from the largest EU heavyweights do not see the use of multilingual internet-based communication as particularly profitable in electoral terms or that they assume their native languages to be widely understood across the EU¹⁴. The presence of only one bi-lingual (English and Welsh) website among the British MEPs seems to confirm our arguments.

Looking at the structural features of the websites, we can observe that the MEPs from CEE are less likely to use interactive platforms (Spear. $R = -.156$). This might be an additional evidence of the weak dialogue between elites and voters in CEE (Agh 1998; Braghiroli and Gherghina 2008; Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007; Lewis and Mansfeldová 2007).

4. Partisan dimension

MEPs' partisan dimension proves also revealing. In terms of "visual identity", the variable "left/right" is positively and significantly correlated with the three features

considered. As we shift from "left" to "right" the number of nationally *flagged* websites (Spear. $R = .371$) and national party logos (Spear. $R = .277$) increases. It suggests that, moving from "left" to "right", the appeal to national identity becomes stronger and reaches its peak among the nationalist/euroskeptic and non-attached MEPs. While among the left leaning MEPs 96.2% of the flagged websites display only the European flag, among the nationalist MEPs the percentage falls to 33.3%. The preference for national party logos might reflect both lower attachment to the European group and the weak structuration of the latter (cfr. Hix, Noury, Roland 2006). The identitarian connotation of national symbols is also confirmed by the coefficients computed for "type of party" (Spear. R equals respectively $-.216$ for *flag* and $-.229$ for *logos*).

Confirming the results of D'Alessio's analysis (2000) of the US elections, the mainstream parties seem more reliant on new technologies than their smaller competitors (Spear. $R = .142$). The affiliation to a mainstream party is also significantly

Table 3. Partisan dimension

		Left-right divide	Type of party (mainstream / niche)
Website	Yes / No	-.007	.142**
Visual identity	Logos	.227**	-.229**
	Flag	.371**	-.216*
	Flag (Yes / No)	.143**	-.024
Multilingualism / Audience	Languages	.001	.026
Features of the website	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.

and positively correlated with the level of update (Spear. $R = .100$), while “left/right” is negatively correlated with all the parameters included in the model. As we shift from “left” to “right” the average number of sophisticated websites decreases (Spear. $R = -.125$), along with their informative level (Spear. $R = -.112$), interactivity (Spear. $R = -.134$), and frequency of the updating process (Spear. $R = -.229$). It seems that the MEPs affiliated to right wing parties are less interested in the “quality” of internet based communication; while no difference emerges in quantitative terms (Spear. $R = -.007$).

5. Micro/macro electoral factors

This final part of the analysis addresses the impact of electoral dynamics (both at the micro and country level) on MEPs internet-based communication.

Being a first timer, rather than a senior MEP, seems to make the difference both in the features displayed by MEPs’ websites and in terms of multi-lingual communication (Spear. $R = -.245$). As tenure increases, the number of sophisticated and informative websites decreases (Spear. R equals

respectively $-.120$ and $-.108$). In practical terms, senior MEPs are generally older than first-timers¹⁵. Quite surprisingly, a previous political career negatively correlates with multilingualism (Spear. $R = -.098$), even though the strength of the correlation seems weak.

In terms of country-level electoral factors, a clear difference emerges in the explanatory power of our two indicators. While variable “open lists” performs quite poorly, our index of “party centrality” seems to produce interesting results. As predictable, the presence of party-centred systems negatively and significantly correlates with the presence of personal websites (Spear. $R = -.107$). As hypothesized, systems with open ballots in local constituencies tend to favour candidates’ electoral activism vis-à-vis the central parties, also in terms of web-based communication. Looking at the demand-side of the relationship, Lusoli (2005b, 250) argue that “one may expect that citizens would be more willing to gather information where they could choose among candidates, as they can do with open electoral lists and non-blocked lists, rather

Table 4. Individual and country-level electoral factors

		Previous career	Tenure	Open lists	Electoral institutions
Website	Yes / No	-.017	.026	.085*	-.107**
Multilingualism / Audience	Languages	-.098*	-.245**	.099*	.118*
Features of the website	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.

¹⁵ If we control for MEPs’ 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.

than where candidates were selected a priori by the parties". Interestingly, the presence of candidate-centred systems is not related to other "qualitative" features included in our model.

V. Conclusions

Although sharing the same institutional environment, MEPs' display diversified attitudes and react differently when faced with the phenomenon of e-politics. Some MEPs simply ignore it. A plurality of them seems to look at internet-based political communication as a marginal and subsidiary object vis-à-vis more traditional forms of electoral communication (we will call them "e-MEPs"). Finally, for a conspicuous minority of MEPs, it seems to represent a fundamental tool of communication and bi-directional dialogue with their constituency. Most of the times, the idea of constituency is delimited by the national borders, sometimes it goes beyond them. We will call them "MEPs 2.0". They appear to have invested conspicuous resources to develop highly interactive platforms of communication. Most of the times, they provide a constant and "qualitatively high" flow of information and involve voters and supporters in their political activity by means of highly interactive e-fora or regular chat-rooms.

In spite of the general neglect from the media, we can see this as a way to bypass the traditional channels of information, usually weak at the European level, and to establish a less filtered and more direct dialogue with the sectors of the society which are familiar with the web (Lusoli 2005). In a recent interview an 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"¹⁶. Another added that "on the whole, there is no connection at all. For most of the voters Europe doesn't matter that much; they barely realize 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"¹⁷. 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, despite the alleged 2nd order nature of the EP politics.

Our preliminary figures show that, while almost three fourth of the MEPs have some sort of personal "web tools" (e-MEPs), when it comes to more qualitative aspects the picture becomes blurred. Our analysis checked whether specific dimensions can explain these differences. After testing a wide range of indicators, we observed that MEPs' attitudes towards internet-based communication are influenced by a number of factors. Most of them seem to act at the individual level (such as age, gender, education or MEPs' parliamentary tenure or previous profession); however also macro and country-level factors proved to have a relevant impact. Our analysis shows that, not only the existence of different internet-based communication styles, but also the nature of vertical communication between elites and voters, are influenced by the national setting in which the MEPs act. Unlike Jankowski et alii (2005) both the territorial dimension considered (North-South and East-West) were found to be play a role, even though in different aspects. Testing the relevance of specific territorial dimensions, we found, for instance, that MEPs from Southern European

¹⁶ Author's interview an Italian MEP, 28 May 2008.

¹⁷ Author's interview an Italian MEP, 27 May 2008.

or Mediterranean countries tend, on average, to rely less on internet-based communication, whereas those from CEE seem to embrace a more traditional vision of e-politics, given the fact that their websites emerge as relatively less interactive and sophisticated. Our belief is that the analysis of these differences may contribute concretely to shed light on the features of vertical communication between elites and voters. One of the most intriguing results produced by our analysis was the detection of a positive correlation between the existence of candidate-centred electoral systems and presence of MEPs' individual websites. When this is the case, it seems more profitable for MEPs to have a personal website as it tends to facilitate the maximization of their electoral efforts. It seems not a coincidence that, on the other hand, most of the major parties in the systems characterized by higher party centrality tend to favour collective portals of the national delegations at the expense of MEPs' individual websites. To summarize, we discovered that not only the "quality" of the message is influenced by the individual characteristics of the messenger, 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 more likely of being heard.

A discourse apart can be done with respect to MEPs' visual identity. Our analysis showed that symbols matter and that, on the whole, their presence or absence as well as their connotation is far from being random. In particular we looked at two graphical features of MEPs' websites: their party logos and the flags. The presence/absence of these features as well as their content

seems to vary according to identifiable factors (such as their partisan affiliation and their country of origin). These symbols also appear to reflect MEPs' attitudes in terms of identity, self-identification, and loyalty. We found, for instance, that MEPs from recently enfranchised CEE Member states tend to systematically favour national symbols to European ones. Likewise, as we shift from "left" to "right" the appeal to national identity becomes stronger as witnessed by the average increase of nationally flagged websites among the right leaning MEPs.

Generalizing our findings beyond the 6th EP or conducting a large scale analysis of MEPs' communication styles in the 7th EP seem still premature; however, what we can hypothesize is a further consolidation of the trends emerged in the past legislature over the 2009-2014 period.

In this respect our results and findings seem to justify further research. In our view it should address more qualitative features of MEPs' personal websites (content-based analysis) and possibly include all of them. On the other hand, more sophisticated analysis seems required to shed light on more specific and still unclear aspects of the phenomenon.

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.

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