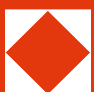
Studien zum Parlamentarismus 29

Jessica Kunert

Members of the European Parliament on the Web

Transparency, Information and Representation on Personal Websites of Parliamentarians



Nomos

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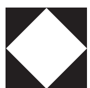

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List of Abbreviations

General abbreviations

CoR	Committee of the Regions
EP group	European Parliament political group
EP	European Parliament
ICT	Information and communication technology
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MNP	Member of a national parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OLS	Ordinary least squares regression
SNS	Social network site
UK	United Kingdom
URL	Uniform resource locator (= website address)

European Parliament political groups

EPP	European People's Party
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
Greens-EFA	The Greens – European Free Alliance
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
GUE-NGL	European United Left – Nordic Green Left
EFD	Europe of Freedom and Democracy

Transnational party groupings

EPP	European People's Party
PES	Party of European Socialists
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party
Greens	European Green Party
AECR	Alliance of European Conversatives and Reformists
EL	Party of the European Left
EFA	European Free Alliance

1. Introduction

1.1 (Digital) communication and representation

The relationship between political representation and political communication is very tight. The former cannot exist without the latter, and they are inextricably linked with each other. In order to represent a nation, a constituency or any other entity, a parliamentarian cannot act in a vacuum, but has to continually relate his or her doings back to the voters and the public sphere; whether it be via personal contact at an event or by the more often used means of television or other news media. Communication processes happen all the time, and are needed to legitimise the parliamentarian's work. Without these efforts, the voter cannot assess whether he or she feels represented or not, and whether a change might be needed (Pitkin 1967; Patzelt 2003).

However, this relationship is a difficult one. Problems quickly come to the surface when looking at the voters. They are not a homogenous mass, and not all of them actively follow the politician's work (see e.g. Stoker 2006). Moreover, the voter is not the only partner when it comes to representation. In fact, a politician and parliamentarian has to answer to many different demands; apart from the voter, there is the party hierarchy with its many levels, from the parliamentary faction, through the national party leadership down to the local party chapter. How does the parliamentarian deal with this? Which of the groups stands in the foreground and is most important? While the local party chapter might be responsible for reselection for the next elections, the parliamentary faction controls career advancement inside the parliament (see Scarrow 1997 for the European Parliament). These relationships of representation resemble a 'web of demands', all of which have to be considered at the appropriate times. All of this affects how the Member of Parliament (MP) acts in parliament and beyond (see Strøm 2000; Hix 2002b). It is also true for the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who work in a special parliament that poses an extra level of demands.

MPs may address this issue with communication efforts. Traditional (offline) parliamentary communication measures, e.g. leaflets and television coverage, do this job (see Marschall 2005: 181-184), but individual parliamentarians are rarely at the foreground of these measures; if any, they would be more likely be the high-ranking MPs (Schöne 2010: 218f).

Nevertheless, these communication efforts are mostly overshadowed by the parliament as a whole, which finds itself overlooked in favour of the executive (see e.g. Patzelt 2006: 140). Digital communication, on the other hand, is open for everyone to use – there are no restrictions, structural or otherwise, to access and the publishing of information. With this in place, there is a wide possible population for studying how parliamentarians make use of and ultimately present themselves in their online communication – as on personal websites.

1.2 Research questions

This study analyses the use of personal websites by parliamentarians, with MEPs in the focus. In a first step, it concentrates on the content and structures of the websites to get an encompassing picture of how they are built. The overall aim of this study is not only to give an overview of how European parliamentarians present themselves, but also to see what factors influence the observed behaviour. The emphasis here lies on the MEPs' perceptions of representation, as shown for example in territorial symbolism about their home country, and how this is presented on the personal websites.

The overarching research question of this study is, "*How do MEPs communicate on their personal websites and what influences this?*". The emphasis of the study lies on ensuring the feedback loop, informational means and how representational understandings are represented via territorial symbolism and content. It is expected that not only one political level is represented, but all parts of the 'web of demands'. However, this assessment cannot be made without the members of the national parliaments (MNPs) as a point of comparison. Thus, the MEPs' personal websites are studied with reference to those of the respective MNPs, which provide the baseline for the comparison, against which the MEPs are judged when presenting themselves. The MNPs represent what is 'normal' for the amount of territorial symbolism and content, as they come from a 'normal' political system that is not continually evolving and does not exhibit the other aforementioned particularities. In this way, comparison is possible not only between political levels but also between MEPs and MNPs from one country. This setup with the MNPs as a point of reference enables an assessment whether MEPs are the same or different – and if so, how.

Before the aforementioned overarching research question can be answered, two steps have to be taken, and thus, the research question is divided into two parts. First of all, the question "*How do they present themselves?*" is answered, operationalised with the help of political communication concepts, which are adapted to parliamentary communication. This question takes stock of the personal websites first, assessing what is shown on them. Also differences across nationalities are considered. The research question "*What affects how they present themselves?*" follows from the first one, meaning the question of what (or who) influences their communication behaviour as it is shown on their personal website. Three strands of possible influences come together in this study, namely the political level, institutional factors on the national level, and ideology.

1.3 Aims of the study

The study has two aims; first, to explore in depth how personal websites are used by parliamentarians by analysing and comparing in detail MEP and MNP websites. This comparison has not been done before. Moreover, taking the different political contexts into consideration, such a comparison is theoretically valuable. The data is presented with descriptive statistics, giving an in-depth view on how personal websites are utilised by MEPs and MNPs. Furthermore, the two political levels are compared on aggregate, looking for similarities in line with previous political science theory as well as differences. Other comparisons are cross-national and show how the individual nationalities compare to each other on the MEP and MNP level.

The second aim of this study is to incorporate representational understandings and the balancing of demands by parliamentarians into political communication theory. Thus, it not only features common categories from political, and more precisely parliamentary communication in the empirical analysis, such as information and transparency, but also looks at how representational understandings are presented on personal websites. Parliamentarians do not act in a vacuum but always have these representational understandings in mind. So the way the latter influence online presentation is adopted into the parliamentary communication concept.

1.4 Relevance for politics and political science

One can clearly see that the internet has an impact on both daily life and the political sphere. Nevertheless, political science as a discipline has found itself puzzled with this new phenomenon. As Margetts (2010: 64) assesses, the internet does not challenge the 'big' concepts; institutions are still institutions as they were defined before the internet, and as in the case of this study, parliaments are still parliaments. However, this is not all, since the internet does challenge the micro level of these big concepts, e.g. the behaviour of people within them. Still, the impact of the internet has been largely ignored by the discipline or found itself to be a footnote in the conventional literature. It does not constitute its own field of study and cannot be studied as an end in itself, but has to be tied to other concepts and theoretical approaches. Political communication comes to mind immediately, but other fields are affected by the internet such as like public administration (see the discussion around e-government, e.g. Reddick 2010) or voter behaviour (see the popularity of voting advice applications like the Wahl-O-Mat in Germany; e.g. Marschall 2011 for Germany; Wall et al. 2009 for Ireland). Nevertheless, research is often left to practitioners or other disciplines like communication science (Margetts 2010: 67). However, political science and the study of the internet come into contact frequently, as this section shows.

The digitalisation of politics proceeded with many questions from academics and practitioners alike. Even before the advent of the internet as it is known today, studies were conducted on the relationship between telecommunications and democracy. Laudon (1977), for example, envisioned citizens taking part in political life via their television screens which were connected to each other – a notion that not only sounds eerily similar to the internet, but also to smart televisions, which are hooked up to the internet and could serve just as Laudon described (for other early studies see Schwartz 1975 who asks questions about social implications of digital media, e.g. on education; and Becker 1981 who assesses possible impacts of another forerunner of the internet, 'teledemocracy'). In the academic world, the question was posed whether the internet would realize Benjamin Barber's (1984) model of a "strong democracy" – a vision in which citizens govern themselves in some aspects of life, meaning that citizens become more and more active in political affairs. The case that has been made for the internet is clear; the internet could serve as a vehicle for carrying out these governing activities, establishing renewed participation in society in a technically simple way.

Many names have been found for the coming together of politics and the internet. They hold roughly the same content, but differ in detail. A few of those terms are "cyberdemocracy" (Dyson 1999) which encompasses the internet as a "democratic marketplace" and sees it fostering democratic citizenship; "e-democracy", which sees citizens as "customers" of politics and thus has a market-based approach (see e.g. Chadwick 2003); "e-government", which studies the bureaucratic side as in increasing the efficiency of administrative tasks (see e.g. Layne/Lee 2001); and "e-governance", which goes beyond the administrative view of "e-government" and encompasses the direct participation of citizens (e.g. Dawes 2008).

Zittel (2001: 173) even sees his version of "electronic democracy" as a "program to reform representative democracy", thus opening up a whole agenda and not only describing a phenomenon, but connecting it with the concept of representative democracy in order, finally, to implement direct democracy (Zittel 2004: 78). He claims that the concept of "electronic democracy" with its various names is too wide, and has to be linked to specific institutional designs in order to be analytically valuable (Zittel 2004: 74, 77). In detail, his reform agenda is threefold and technology-focused: increasing access to political information, increasing dialogue between the political elites and the citizens, and giving citizens more chances to play a part in decision-making (Zittel 2001: 176ff., 180).

However, this concept only works in a certain framework in which both groups are technologically adept and parliamentarians are willing to give up power (Zittel 2001: 193ff.). These constraints are exemplary for all concepts concerning technology and democracy – there is no automatism, people actually have to *want* to introduce electronic media into their daily life and work (Lake 2010). However, Zittel's concept is criticised by Gibson, Römmele and Ward (2004: 194-198); saying that even though electronic democracy may bring about limited reforms, there will be no fundamental change to the workings of representative democracy, and that its workings will stay as usual.

What can be seen from this short introduction is that the relationship between politics and the internet is contested, and that no common definitions have been found yet. But politics and the internet are not the only part of the equation; the traditional media also play their role in this relationship since it is unlikely that they will vanish due to the internet in the near future.

The possible impact of the internet on political science and the relevance of the internet for the discipline is manifold. First of all, the internet is a phenomenon that belongs to the overarching concept of the "information society" or "communication society", which goes beyond the political sphere and is said to have led to a need for the state to reform its traditional hierarchical instruments (Beniger 1986; Webster 1994, 2002; Fuchs 2007; von Bismarck/Dettling/Schuppan 2003). The expansion of the internet into daily life as well as politics takes place within the context of the rise of the aforementioned "information" and "communication" societies (Webster 1994, 1995), but both terms are not clearly defined and often used interchangeably.[1] However, Pfetsch's (1998) definition is useful for shedding light on the nature of "communication society", saying that it is characterised by an expansion of media offers, commercialisation of all public communication, and acceleration of the communication tempo, and a merging of individual and mass communication (Pfetsch 1998: 243-249). The internet fits this description to a large extent, since it brought a wide expansion of communication and information opportunities, heavily accelerated the communication tempo through means like e-mails and instant messaging which are delivered the very second they are sent, and merged communication forms offering a variety of communication paths, like one-to-one (private message), but also one-to-many (a newsletter), many-to-one (fans writing to their idol) and many-to-many communication (activist groups communicating with each other) (Müller 2007: 42). Because of these impacts on many parts of society, political science has thus to work alongside other disciplines to assess the implications of digital communication on the political sphere and beyond.

Moreover, the relevance for political science becomes clearer when looking at different political cultures. In the United States of America, a tight relationship can be found between technology and a political vision of liberty. This dates back to the constitution, which sees political interaction as vital for democracy – and since technology may strengthen the political voice of the citizens, it is embraced (Kleinsteuber/Hagen 1998: 72-76; Hagen 1997). As Margetts (2010: 79) found, the U.S. state legislatures were very open to engaging with citizens online from an early start in 2006; with the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, under which all federal contracts and other federal spending has to be put

1 Webster (2002) even finds that the concept – he uses the term "communication society" – is no longer useful for research due to its being imprecise and encompassing many different far-reaching variables.

online. However, not all countries are as open as the U.S. concerning transparency, so political culture does play a part when considering possible impacts of the internet in politics. As Pfetsch (2014: 15) says, the structural conditions of the political system and the media system have an impact on communication, and these differ across countries (see also Pfetsch et al. 2014, Esser/Pfetsch 2003 for an early presentation of the concept). Thus, she speaks of different "political communication cultures". Voltmer (2006) supports this in her edited volume on the impact of the context for new democracies in several parts of the world, e.g. in Southern Europe and Latin America. In these studies, the democratic transition is the main influence studied. As can already be seen, the concept of "political communication cultures" is multidimensional and encompasses many possible variables, which may look at the input and output side, the system functions, or at role perceptions (Pfetsch 2014: 22-27).

All in all, political science is lagging behind the real world phenomena and research has not caught up. The reasons are manifold; from a general mistrust towards new technologies, one can see several difficulties arising from the study of the internet in conjunction with political science. First of all, the possible impact of the internet has to be incorporated into the body of conventional theory and linked to traditional topics. Second, empirical research is now subject to a very new environment, in which the rules of common methodological approaches may not apply. Ethical considerations concerning anonymity may play a role, but also problems of obtaining a representative sample of websites or respondents as well as keeping one's data in an environment that constantly changes (see Margetts 2010: 84f.). So, in order for the internet become mainstream in political science, many new ground rules have to be set in the future. In a nutshell, the internet has changed politics profoundly while barely scratching political science.

1.5 Parliamentary communication goes online

"MPs' web-sites tend to be dull, infrequently updated and non-interactive" – that was Coleman's (1999: 385) assessment of websites of Members of Parliament seventeen years ago. Since then, much has changed; the internet has now become a fixture in the political sphere. Election campaigns no longer take place without the use of websites, social network sites and other online channels. With a push from Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, these online measures have definitely arrived in politics

(see Schweitzer/Albrecht 2011; Levenshus 2010; Jarvis/Wilkerson 2005 for an early assessment of U.S. House Representatives' websites in 1996 in comparison with 2001). However, election campaigning is more of an event, happening in a short yet intensive time frame. However, how do these online measures fare when no elections are on the horizon? How is the internet used to present the everyday work of parliament during the legislative term, in which all the crucial political work happens?

This study focuses on parliamentary communication in the online sphere during the legislative cycle. Communicating with the voters as well with the party and the mass media has always been one of the core tasks of parliament (see Mill 1861; Bagehot 1867; Marschall 2005). Representation of wishes and demands cannot be achieved without these communicative efforts. A flow of information and engagement has to include both sides of the political process, parliamentarians and voters alike (Patzelt 2003). However, this has not been an easy feat with the common measures of parliamentary communication. Leaflets and brochures have to be printed and distributed, which is expensive and often does not have the desired effect, as people won't read them or do not even receive them in the first place. More direct measures like offering visits to parliament reach only an even smaller group of people.

With the advent of the internet in daily life, the arena of parliamentary communication has changed. First of all, the internet and its possibilities had an impact on many other areas of life before going on to politics; online shopping has become commonplace, as has reading news online instead of buying a newspaper, and these are just two examples (Shih 2004; Nguyen/Western 2006). Internet applications have definitely made their way into daily life, and are still expanding into new areas. Politics, in the end, has been one of them. From putting parliamentary documents online and using the internet as an archive, to extensive personal websites of individual MPs, the development has been rapid and is still ongoing.[2] The repertoire of both internal and external parliamentary communication has been redefined and stocked up with a plethora of new tools – there are even handbooks for (aspiring) politicians which explain the individual measures and their use in detail and in the context of everyday political work as well as campaigning (see e.g. Merz/Rhein 2009). Of course, the use of the internet for political matters has certain pitfalls, which have to

2 See e.g. Jarvis and Wilkerson (2005) for an early assessment of the U.S. House members' websites from 1996 and 2001, or Wolling, Schmolinsky and Emmer (2010) for a study of members of the German Landtage.