

Selling the individual, the party or the parliament?

MEP's strategic use of the World Wide Web as a marketing communication devise

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Introduction

Members of parliaments have distinct functions which can determine perceptions of them as successful within their roles. These traditionally link around representative functions and parliamentary roles; scrutinising policy within committees, representing groups of constituents (national or local), or acting as advocates for their party. While these roles have been explored in most detail within the context of national parliaments and particularly in the UK (Rush, 2001) where there is both a strong partisan divide and MPs are closely linked to carefully defined geographic areas, we posit that these roles are not unique to the Westminster model and apply also to members of the European Parliament (EP). Members of any parliament will play both a scrutinizer and advocate role within parliament while also promoting the interests of groups who they feel they represent or have been lobbied on behalf of. The European Parliament, with both national and EP grouping divides should also evidence representation of ideological positions, specific policy interests linked to Commission and Committee roles and representation of nations or regions. However there is a further dimension which has now been linked to the role of an elected representative: self promotion. Linked to an extent on work on the personalisation thesis (Mughan, 2000; Langer, 2007), where political choices are increasingly driven by the personality and charisma of the individual, it is observed that politicians increasingly attempt to build a three-dimensional public persona in order to appeal to voters. This personal branding can compete with their functions as party advocates as they seek to build a personal vote. While such drivers may not be as clear for all MEPs, there is also scope for them to advance both within the EP, and within their national parties and political systems, providing they can promote themselves and build a public political profile.

Marketing based analyses of party communication position the party as the core brand, MPs, MEPs and candidates are promotional tools of the brand creating

consistency and ubiquity of brand messages (Lees-Marshment, 2011). While this approach is consistent with local outlets for corporate brands, such as a high street branch of a chain of fashion outlets or banks, such analogies do not always transfer well to a political context. Centralisation can create a conflict between the individual representative, who enters politics for personal reasons and seeks to be a change agent, and the party which seeks coherence and consistency in communication. The individual is more likely to use the metaphor of the independent local shop to describe their representative function, as opposed to seeing themselves as one cog within a big brand (Lilleker & Negrine, 2003). Within online environments it is the individual which is most likely to be empowered as the ability to create personal and bespoke communication tools for little cost challenges the top-down, centralised, command and control tendency implicit in the marketised and professionalised model of political communication and party management. As is noted by Wring and Ward (2010), reflecting on the use of the online environment during the 2010 general election in Great Britain, “New media have been seen as providing more opportunities for individual candidates to personalise their message. Web 2.0 tools, in particular, also allow activists and interested supporters more scope to create their own campaigns and network with one another without having to go through party HQ” (p. 228). This concept of personal branding is argued to be a key factor which drives the communication strategy of a range of candidates and elected representatives from councillor to president. Therefore the websites of MEPs can be seen as the product of strategic decisions made by the individual regarding what they choose to promote and how they employ tools for self-presentation and perception management.

MEPs: representing, promoting and communicating with communities

Roles of MPs are traditionally seen as performing legislative scrutiny; acting as a party activist and advocate; and serving their constituency. Separating these into the roles of delegate (constituency representative), trustee (parliamentary actor), party activist and constituency service (linked to casework) functions, Jackson and Lilleker (2009) found that much of a UK MPs web presence was dominated by material which promoted the party, this despite the fact that there was no election due for at least ten months from the point of analysing the websites. A casework oriented communication approach came second followed by work detailing the trusteeship role within select

committees or parliamentary voting and finally few engaged in acting as a delegate for the area they represented. While in actuality the party activist function was expressed mostly through the architecture of the site (colours and logos) as well as extensive use of hyperlinks back to party websites and specific policy areas, the findings did not suggest a model of e-representation was emerging. Rather that UK MPs acted largely as information hubs, detailing their work within parliament and on behalf of their constituency and specific constituents or groups thereof. There were few who attempted to elicit two-way communication between themselves and website visitors, either constituents (though they were given specific details of how to contact the MP) or those interested in specific areas of policy which connected with the role of the MP.

Follow-up studies have measured UK MPs use of a range of modalities and have tested further for an e-representation model. Mapping the use of websites, e-newsletters, weblogs and social networking profiles, Jackson and Lilleker (2011a) suggest different modalities potentiate different communication strategies. Weblogs and social networking sites (the most popular of the latter being Facebook) provide an inbuilt architecture of participation and encourage some MPs to provide space for, as well as on occasion entering into, discussions relating to policy. Discussions can range across a territorial axis (relating to specific constituencies or the nation as a whole) and an issue axis (relating to broad current political issues of a partisan or non-partisan nature). However, websites and e-newsletters, on the whole, are push communication tools. They are designed to transmit information out to visitors to the website, or their subscribers and readers, with feedback being limited to provision of an email address. This is perhaps a function of the design of specific tools, as well as both resources, political drivers and individual motivations. Weblogs and social networking sites provide spaces for interaction with no requirement for technological know-how; hence they facilitate conversation more. However, MPs are often more likely to use these platforms if they feel it will be electorally advantageous as well as if they are more familiar with using these tools personally (see also Williamson 2010).

The use of Twitter by UK MPs follows similar patterns. Party here is the laggard in terms of number of times featured in tweets, though constituency casework is equally

low in priorities for tweeting MPs. As with the use of weblogs and social networking sites, and to a lesser extent websites which offer simplistic personal information, is an emergence of an impression management strategy by MPs. Jackson and Lilleker (2011b) found that the majority of tweets by UK MPs fell into either the impression management category or promoted the MP as a person. The former focuses more on promoting the image of the MP as a hard-working public servant, constantly active, but gives little detail of what they are working on (so detailing their daily or weekly duties for example); the latter is simply offering personal information about family life, interests or are simply personal tweets about everyday life.

Given the separation between the MEP and their domestic politics it could be suggested that they would demonstrate a range of communication strategies, demonstrating both their work, and personal work ethic, as well as a strong degree of personalisation as with domestic MPs. However, key roles we would mainly expect to find displayed in communication online would be explicitly demonstrating service to their constituents, either their regions or nations and for some being advocates of the EP/EU institutions. In an EP context, alongside acting as a party activist, an MEP would also promote their EP grouping. Despite Jackson & Lilleker (2009) finding party tending to be the architecture, this may not be expected to be the case for MEPs. They would be expected to have outward links to the main sites of their national party (unless independent) and their EP group affiliation, and perhaps their logos on their main home page but this would be less likely to constitute the main content of an MEP's website and represent nothing more than a form of collective branding and expression of collective identity.

While such features are becoming standard elements of the architecture of the websites of elected representatives, it is suggested that online political behaviour, and so the potential for a greater focus on acting as an e-representative, is evolving. The last two years have seen a range of online platforms used for political activism, in particular by the Barack Obama campaign in the USA (Johnson 2009; Johnson 2010; Lilleker & Jackson 2011) as well as more basic usage during the German 2009 SuperWahl election (Schweitzer, 2011) and the UK 2010 General Election (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011a; 2011b). The embedding of social networking and Web 2.0 into

elections is reshaping to some extent how elections are conducted and how participants are engaged; and an interactive and connection-making strategy may be even more important within non-election periods. As hinted at by Ward and Wring (2010), and quoted within our introduction, the various platforms and technologies which make up the Internet allow parties and candidates to promote themselves directly to online publics across cyberspace and join the online political activists within their social spaces. Activists can also engage in a range of partisan and non-partisan campaigning activities building followings for campaigns. However, the party/candidate communication and the activism is no longer taking place in different locations bracketed away from one another, politics is part of the 'big conversation' which takes place across websites, weblogs, social networking sites and microblogs and can involve a range of actors both elected, or elite, and the ordinary citizen and woman in the street (Margolis & Moreno-Riano, 2009). No longer need they talk past one another, to coin the phrase of Bob Franklin (2004), they can talk to one another.

While there are inherent dangers for any individual or group which seeks election or is elected interacting directly with citizens in open access spaces (Stromer-Galley, 2004) this may be unavoidable if representatives seek to connect with those they represent online (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011). It may also become a *de rigeuer* feature of campaigning and to be only offline could inhibit chances of election or re-election, by appearing dated, out-of-touch or unprofessional (Negrine & Lilleker, 2003) as well being a vote loser (Tedesco, 2007). Therefore there is an opportunity for elected representatives to harness online political activists and connect them to their work within parliaments. This may be particularly the case for MEPs. Their work straddles various nations and they largely work remotely from their domestic polities. In order to make their work relevant, gain support for their work, understanding of the role of the EP, and also win votes it would be expected that there is an emergent e-representative model which harnesses a range of activists to the MEPs online presences.

Given the lower importance of the tie to a specific geographic area within a nation, there would be expected to be a national focus and a political focus to the communication strategy of an MEP. Research on UK MPs found they were most

likely to act as information hubs, attempting to build websites that acted as reference points for constituents and UK citizens seeking information on political campaigns and issues. Few solicited feedback or were willing to interact on policy issues, though this was the preserve of a few MPs. We propose that MEPs working in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century may expand on this by encouraging visitors to their websites, and/or their followers and friends on social networking sites, to act as online promoters for their policies or to aid them develop ideas relating to their parliamentary work; for example providing information that can be used to shape or reinforce an MEP's argument based on local knowledge and experiences. While doubts have been raised as to the efficacy of such moves, the building of communities around ideas is a central feature of work on the network society (Castells, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006). Only a minority may engage, but if EU citizens feel there is a social presence (Rafaeli, 1988) and they are able to have influence within their own networks as well as having some degree of meaningful input into the thinking of an elected representative (the MEP) this could encourage a wide range of discussions which adhere to the best practice of a public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009; see also Papachrissi 2002).

Community building can act both as an aid to furthering the democratic and representative functions of the MEP, and broader EP, while also acting as a personal promotion and branding strategy for the MEP as a political actor. Their communication strategy can draw citizens towards them with the website functioning as a push communication tool, but with pulls created by other media use and, in particular, strategies to create communities of interest around them. Credibility can be built up by providing information which attracts some interested individuals (possibly those seeking information for professional or educational purposes); it is most likely that these will be served from features built into the website which acts as a hub for visitors. MEPs may also wish to build communities around their ideas, thus looking at developing media strategies for releasing information about upcoming votes or campaigns. These are frequent uses for weblogs, Twitter and video and picture sharing sites. Ideas sharing communities may also work around asymmetrical feedback elements, such as opinion polls, which allow MEPs to collect data from visitors regarding their ideas. Interactive communities will have flatter hierarchies and

will centre around the sharing of ideas among community members and the MEP can be included as a participant but at least is expected to monitor conversations and for the outcomes of discussions to filter into their political actions. None of these will be exclusive from the representative functions but will build upon these and how community building functions fit with representative functions as well as a personal branding strategy is of significant interest in order to understand online communication strategies as well as considering what might feature within a model of best practice.

From a branding perspective, drawing on theoretical constructs within marketing and public relations, an MEP should attempt to construct an image that combines all role they perceive to be important in order to be credible. Equally, this should result in some degree of brand equity. However, brand equity is not solely a construct based on actual value but a value which is perceived based on the communicational strategy of the brand. One measure of brand equity within a political context is vote share, however this is a blunt measure with a range of intervening variables within the European Parliament; the most important of which being differences in voting systems. However, and if community building is a widespread activity, the following an MEP can gain within their communities can act as a surrogate measure for the effectiveness of their communication strategy. This can be linked to what attributes they emphasise, what tools they use and the types of communities they encourage. We therefore hypothesise that we will see differential effectiveness levels of community building but, and inline with measurement tools which emphasise linking communication to specific key performance indicators (Phillips & Davis, 2010), it should be possible to determine that strategic choices have an impact in terms of numbers of fans or followers within online communities. This allows us not only to understand common branding strategies but also test their effectiveness.

Method and the Coding and Categorisation Strategy

Our analyses are based on content analysis of the 440 MEPs' websites linked from their official profile on the European Parliament website.¹ Among 440 official links

¹ MEP profiles are provided on <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert/groupAndCountry.do?language=EN> [entry 02.04.2011]. Only 440 out of 736 MEP had their official websites. Additionally we search through

334 (76%) lead to websites, 11 (3%) to a weblog and 95(21%) to hybrids. Not noted previously, we found a number of sites the architecture of which combined the compartmentalised design of the traditional website with a news feed in weblog format allowing comments. Content analysis of the official MEP websites was conducted in November 2010². Up to a maximum of 102 features (52 selected for the analysis) were identified as present or absent on the website. All coders passed inter-coder reliability tests (the final score was 91%), any irregularities were checked and corrected. Websites were coded online and offline from the archived³ version of campaign websites.

For the purposes of our research we developed a series of coding categories by grouping together features within our content analysis, these are listed and justified as follows:

Personalisation denotes biography/personal information; professional background; education; personal/family information; interests; sports and hobbies both on website and social networking profiles or using and internal photo gallery or external photosharing site. All these provide a range of information about the MEP as a professional and/or individual and indicate their qualifications and specific character qualities (de Vrees 2008; de Landtsheer 2005; de Landtsheer & de Vrees 2011).

Branding can take a number of approaches, the two most common are having a focus on a parliamentary role or a constituency role. These need not be mutually exclusive and can also be combined. In the context of an MEP the parliamentary or scrutiny role, denoted as e-representation/e-constituency would be indicated through section(s) dedicated to work in the EP. These would indicate the MEP is hard working and active as well as giving insights into the array of duties an MEP performs and the issues they are involved in at the EP level. A more constituency service approach

Google.com websites of 296 MEP by entering name and surname (we found that probably 166 of them had websites however they did not link it to EP profile). Due to methodological issues (e.g. we were unsure that the websites found on google.com are official MEP websites, as in some case there were more than 1 websites provided, some of them were not updated since last term (before 2009) or sometimes with the popular surname, the MEP websites was not listed among first 50 entries). To avoid all the problems caused by this problem we decided to exclude from the analysis all those MEP who did not officially provide their website address.

² November was chosen as a month without any disturbance, with MEPs introduced well into daily routine after summer holidays and being not disturbed by Christmas break. EP was working according to its standards.

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

would be denoted by page(s) dedicated to work related to the region or nation or to specific non-partisan issues which demonstrates both hardworking and representative dimensions and creates a link between the physical place the MEP represents or groups of issue-specific activists and their work within the EP. Central to this is the notion of an e-constituency which functions only in online environments (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009) but that acts as a community which follows the work of an MEP and can be used as a supportive resource in the course of campaign activities. Of lesser importance in previous studies of UK MPs, but possibly more important within an EP context would be party/EP group promotion. Frequently this is indicated by the use of logos, hyperlinks to party and/or the EP grouping from the website and options to join party. These features denote the MEPs' affiliation and are attractive to partisan supporters.

Alongside the positioning of the MEP detailed above we measured the extent to which MEPs were engaged in online *community building* activities. We identify three types of communities: onsite knowledge sharing communities; ideas sharing communities; and interactive communities. *Onsite Knowledge Sharing Communities* are created when MEPs position themselves as information hubs and attempt to provide details of interest to a range of visitors to their website. These can be highly politically engaged EU citizens or journalists, bloggers, academics and students who visit in order to collect items of use within their professional or civic lives or browsers who may seek only simplistic information. Those who frequently visit in order to collect information would be expected to disseminate this information further as activists or within a professional political communication capacity. *Ideas Sharing Communities* permit elements of feedback, MEPs can use a range of social networking tools to assess support for particular initiatives or to crowdsource information that would help them in their campaigning. One would expect participants within these communities to share content across platforms and contribute to a conversation around issues. *Interactive Communities* permit open conversation without hierarchy and for ideas to flow both from and to the MEP. This can be linked explicitly to the professional activities of the MEP within parliament and aid them to make decisions based on e-deliberation models consistent with public sphere theory (Dahlberg, 2007; Dalgren, 2010). We additionally note the number of participants

within the community, although it is impossible to get data on visitors to a website we use the proxy here of fans and followers MEPs have gained on Facebook or similar social networks and Twitter. While this limits the extent to which we can measure an effect from communication, it may allow us to draw some inferences regarding the attraction of an audience through the use of features and branding styles.

Note we avoid suggesting that MEPs will be more likely to build one specific type of community but that there will be a hierarchy of usage. While some will rely on acting as an information hub this will be suggested not only by the appearance of features consistent with onsite knowledge sharing but also by a dearth of features denoting encourage formation of other communities. Equally, while an MEP may provide areas where information can be found and disseminated, and where feedback on ideas can be given, if there are additionally features that encourage non-hierarchical interaction then they are classified as encouraging the formation of an interactive community.

Hypotheses

- 1) MEPs will harness the tools of the Internet to promote themselves as a hardworking parliamentarian; a national/regional representative and a party/EP group actor – combining these roles positions them as effective representatives across their official functions.
- 2) MEPs will demonstrate a personalisation strategy; however this is likely to be mediated by both personal and political variables.
- 3) MEPs will provide tools that will allow communities to form around them; these are more likely to be information seeking communities than ones which share material or interact on policies. However the latter is expected to be an emergent strategy that may well be adopted by MEPs with specific personal or political motivations.
- 4) The size of communities will be a factor of communication strategy and we will be able to detect a relationship between the use of specific features or groupings of features and the number of fans or followers within online communities.

Statistical Analysis

MEPs online: basic data

Prior to looking in detail at specific communication strategies we present basic regression data which describes overall which MEPs are more likely to have official websites (table 1), as well as means (table 2) for the use of features defined as providing an experience consistent with the Web 1.0 or Web 2.0 eras, the use of social networking sites and also Twitter. These data offer an overall topography for the use of the Internet within the European parliament. The logistic regression model in Table 1 indicates which MEPs are mostly to link to their personal website from the official MEP EP profile. We find only two personal characteristics (age and gender) have statistical significance; older and male MEPs are less likely to provide official links. Party size has positive statistical significance (MEP belonging to major and minor parties are more likely to promote their websites).

Table 1: Logistic regression for having/not having personal website

	Odds Ratio
Personal characteristic	
Gender	1.859**
Age years	.969***
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)	
Major parties	1.737*
Minor parties	2.472**
Country characteristics	
Preferential voting system	1.561**
GDP 2009	1.221
Electorate size	.922
% of population using internet	2.740**
EP characteristics	
EP party ideology scale	1.063
Membership in EP commissions	.978
Terms-old in EP	1.598***
Terms-new in EP	4.370***
'new EU'	.433
Pseudo R ²	0.098

Note: Outcomes are odds ratio from logistic regression. Dependent variable – dummy MEP have a link from official EP profile to personal web site = 1, otherwise = 0. Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm) GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) (EU-27 = 100). Source: Eurostat; electorate size (ln natural logarithm) – nb of population in country/nb of seats in EP per country; % of population using internet per country (ln natural logarithm); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1–7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1–7 scale, GUE(1), Greens, S&D, ALDE, EPP, EFD, ECR(7)); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (15) (scale, 0–7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (12) (scale, 0–2); 'new EU' - countries joined EU after 2004 (12) (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0)

Statistical significance *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.001

A positive relationship can also be identified for MEPs elected under more personalized voting systems (preferential vote in contrast to list voting) and proportion of country population using Internet. Also those MEPs who have sat for longer in the EP (both from 'old' and 'new' EU countries; joining respectively before and after 2004) are more likely to have an official link (this effect is especially strong for more experienced MEPs from 'new' countries).

In terms of general use of features MEPs provide fairly sophisticated websites using a mixture of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features, although Web 2.0 features overall remain the poor relation. The websites consistently are used to present information, but delivery tools are increasingly engaging; interactive tools remain a feature on a majority of MEPs' websites. This links neatly to an equally low average for features that encourage communities to form and in particular frequency of updates. Across a minority of sites these were quite high within the month of study, on websites the greatest number was 88, on social networks 686, however the mean average is a long way from this. There is also a strong variance in community size, the amount of visible fans, followers or subscribers and MEP has. Some command a large audience, up to 55,768, many much less though with a mean average of 1103.5 clearer many MEPs enjoy speaking to a reasonably large audience across their online presences. The extent of using specific community building features suggest most MEPs consider themselves as information hubs, only a minority encourage sharing, feedback or discussion. Branding tends largely to be party first, then nation and individual, though there is significant variation here. Furthermore, when targeting specific audiences, journalists are given priority over random browsers seeking simplistic experiences, then those concerned with seeking information on specific policy issues and finally partisan supporters. Overall, therefore, we find MEPs largely focusing on providing information useful to journalists and see a website as a way to get material remediated as opposed to talking directly to a mass audience. However, some do seek a wider following both through their branding strategy and the communication.

Table 2: Overall mean scores for web performance

	Nb of features in category	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
GENERAL WEB PERFORMANCE	52	6	40	19.95	5.82
Web 1.0	34	2	26	15.50	4.10
Web 2.0	18	0	14	4.45	3.29
Information	32	3	29	13.38	4.02
Engagement	31	2	23	10.65	3.72
Interaction	15	0	12	4.99	2.63
Number of entries in November (on the web + blog + Facebook + Twitter)		0	690	23.86	55.49
Number of entries in November (web + blog)		0	88	8.40	11.02
Number of entries in November (Facebook + Twitter)		0	686	15.46	53.23
Personalisation	12	0	12	3.74	2.05
E-representation	4	0	4	2.19	1.01
E-constituency	6	0	6	1.81	1.05
OKS community	2	0	2	.88	.55
ISC community.	8	0	7	1.80	1.54
INT community	9	0	9	1.79	1.76
Community size: number of supporters/ friends and followers (Facebook + Twitter)		0	55768	1103.50	3342.21

Promotion and Branding: the hardworking remote representative

The areas which MEPs promote can be signified in a number of ways. Traditionally the branding, as with corporate websites, would perhaps only be associated with using party logos, colours and slogans alongside links to the main party website and, during election campaigns, demonstrating having a good record that indicates suitability to be a representative. Here we examine the extent to which party and in the case of MEPs their EP grouping remains integral to branding, or whether demonstrating being an active parliamentarian and activist for the nation and or region is equally important within the context of the EP.

It is fair to say that within the architecture of MEPs' websites they denote which domestic party they belong to, and their EP affiliation. However this, as with UK MPs is more architectural than promotional as is indicated by the overall mean across all websites of 2.19. We also compared means across nations and found a similar level of deviation from the mean, with Cyprus, Bulgaria and Luxemburg having the highest score (above 2.5) and Lithuanian MEPs being least likely to advertise their political affiliations (less than 1, not shown here) but all others average around two out of the four key indicators. MEPs representing minor parties do advertise their party slightly more but this is not significant, however overall, as found with UK MPs, political affiliations are simply in the form of logos and hyperlinks with only 22 (5%) of MEPs having a link allowing visitors to join their parties. Regression (model B) indicates only two statistically significant factors shown to be influencing whether there is a party/EP grouping related promotional strategy: MEPs from minor parties perform better (comparing to both fringe parties and major parties (post test)) as well as those from countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 (12 countries). This suggests that there is a cohort division between old and new Europe as well as there potentially being a strategy among MEPs representing minor parties to be more proactive in raising their profiles and presenting a more personal brand than a member of the party machine.

Demonstrating a e-representational strategy shows greater variance, but is a lot lower than could be expected with a mean average overall of 1.81 out of a total of six features. Germany, Austria, Slovakia, France, Ireland, Sweden and the UK seem to place greater demands on MEPs to work hard for the nation (score above 2.0); and indeed it is largely MEPs who represent these nations who are most likely to provide specific areas focusing on their nations and/or regions (in the cases of Lithuania, France, Germany, Ireland and Poland, over 40% of MEPs from those countries had a specific section dedicated to national or regional issues). Politically the only slight deviations (which are statistically significant for E-representation) from the mean are for Green parties and minor parties often these are the same as most Green parties have minor representation in national parliament, it also seems that MEPs who have been in the EP the longest (four terms or more, not shown here) are slightly more likely to be advertising their work as a E-representative (significant for means comparison but not in regression).

Table 3: Means for branding strategies according to with party size and EP grouping

	personalisation	e-representation	e-constituency
major	3.66	2.16	1.75
minor	4.15	2.34	2.06
fringe	3.2	1.97	1.53
EPP	3.87	2.18	1.79
S&D	3.73	2.17	1.81
ALDE	3.79	2.43	1.86
green	3.74	2.32	2.47
ECR	3.71	2	1.5
GUE	2.55	2.09	1.36
EFD	3.25	1.5	1.13
Not Affiliated MEP	2.89	2	1.67

Only bold numbers indicates groups different with statistical significance

In the regressions (Table 4, Model C) it can be observed that MEP from minor parties (in comparison to fringe party) as well as those from more leftist EP party groups are more likely to build an E-constituency. More proactive are also those from countries with larger electorates for each MEP [*lnpopulmep*] and with higher proportion of internet users [*lninternetuse*], these figures perhaps suggest that for these MEPs online communication is seen as the most viable way to reach large populations. Also gender plays an important role, female MEPs appear keener to promote their work than their male counterparts.

Table 4: Poisson regressions for personalisation, e-representation and e-constituency

	Personalisation Model A	E-representation Model B	E-constituency Model C
Personal characteristic			
Gender	-.081	.047	.111
Age	-.006**	.002	.001
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)			
Major parties	.038	.130	.205
Minor parties	.208*	.225*	.279**
Country characteristics			
Preferential voting system	.072	-.038	-.092
GDP 2009	.455**	.058	.156
Electorate size	-.016	.026	.155**
% of population using internet	-.242	-.062	.384**
EP characteristics			
EP party ideology scale	.007	-.018	-.038**
Membership in EP commissions	.017	-.012	.013
Terms-old in EP	-.001	.008	.028
Terms-new in EP	-.042	-.106	-.033
'new EU'	.377**	.278*	.227
Constant	.602	.206	-4.068

Note: Models are results of Poisson regression, robust. Dependent variables are continuous personalisation (0-12), e-representation (0-4), e-constituency (0-6). Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm) GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) (EU-27 = 100), Source: Eurostat; electorate size (ln natural logarithm) – nb of population in country/nb of seats in EP per country; % of population using internet per country (ln natural logarithm); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1=7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1-7 scale, GUE(1), Greens, S&D, ALDE, EPP, EFD, ECR(7)); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (15) (scale, 0-7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (12) (scale, 0-2); 'new EU' - countries joined EU after 2004 (12) (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0) Statistical significance *p<.10. **p<.05

Personalisation

Personal branding has been argued to be important within modern politics; however trends towards personalisation, both the strategic promotion of the individual and focus on individual character traits by media, are largely a feature of certain systems (Langer, 2007: Karvonen, 2009). We identified twelve features that demonstrate a clear personalisation strategy, the overall mean for MEPs is 3.74 (see Table 1). There seems little national variance, the Czech, Slovenian and Greek MEPs seem slightly above average but not indicating a specific deviation from the norm (by one standard deviation 2.04, not shown here). MEPs representing minor parties equally show a slightly higher degree of personalisation (with a mean of 4.15) as do those elected by more personal voting systems (with a mean of 4.0) which are Ireland and Malta (single transferable vote) and Luxemburg (an open list) (however the latter is not statistically significant). There is no variation linked to an MEPs vote share suggesting this is not seen as a vote winner. Ideology, as based on EP grouping, shows no indication of being an indicator (also not significant in regressions). The clearest difference is generational; younger MEPs, seem to be more willing to divulge personal data than their older colleagues. Regression (table 4 model A) indicates that representing countries with a higher GDP as well as new EU countries (that joined after 2004, with Slovenia and Czech being second and third among the new countries with highest 2009 GDP rate) also has positive impact on personalisation.

The community builder

Community building is not a universal activity, many MEPs remain locked into the 'build it and they will come' philosophy of Web 1.0 and their websites largely lack features geared towards attracting a wide range of visitors. Overall the mean for community building is 4.48 out of a possible 19. Out of the three possible forms of community MEPs were predicted to encourage, acting as a hub for information is, as expected, the most popular strategy. In terms of overall means Online Knowledge Sharing is out of two, the mean of .88 shows it is not universal. Ideas Sharing, 1.80 out of seven, is lower with the Interactive community 1.79, out of nine, lower still.

In terms of variance within the cohorts, MEPs who act as information hubs tend to be more active within parliamentary work. They sit on the most commissions and so are engaged in high level decision making therefore have much information to report. Similarly, due to the number of duties the MEPs perform in the process of their work within commissions, it may also mean they are unable to focus to a great extent upon their online communication. Contradictory to our assumptions MEPs who are elected to the EP longer (from both old (15) and new (12) member states) are less likely to provide vast amounts of tailored information (see regressions table 6)

Ideas sharing community building seems to be an emergent strategy, where MEPs engage with the online community and gain some private feedback as well using the network to extend their reach. As expected there is a generational divide which demonstrates that younger MEPs are more proactive online and see a value in harnessing the power of the online crowd. However there are further intervening variables: Ideology and representing nations using the preferential vote system. This shows that while there may be a generational divide, it is politicians representing left wing parties and EP groupings that are more likely to tap into the network effect and this may also be influenced by the way they are elected. Those elected under preferential voting system (which indicates more personalised vote casting than party lists) perhaps seek to build connections with their electorates and open their sites to visitors to engage in asymmetrical communication (see table 5 model ISCcomm)

In terms of building interactive communities, the only clear independent variable is age. This is clearly the preserve of a few of the younger MEPs who are digital natives and so familiar with using these tools within their everyday lives. However while exploring mean performance by home party size we find that the minor parties are performing significantly better (2.2) than major (1.69) or fringe parties (1.57) (see table 2). Overall, however, it appears that public interactivity is a step too far towards a more participatory paradigm of political communication for more than a small minority of MEPs.

Table 5: Poisson regressions for community features

	Model OKScomm	Model ISCcomm	Model INTcomm
Personal characteristic			
Gender	.021	-.034	-.019
Age	-.000	-.013***	-.019***
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)			
Major parties	-.076	-.216	.075
Minor parties	-.044	-.069	.285
Country characteristics			
Preferential voting system	-.044	.170**	.078
GDP 2009	-.048	.202	.329
Electorate size	.015	-.066	-.066
% of population in country using internet	-.074	-.089	-.154
EP characteristics			
EP party ideology scale	-.027	-.079**	-.034
Membership in EP commissions	.063**	.023	.007
Terms-old in EP	-.081**	-.037	-.058
Terms-new in EP	-.214**	.064	.063
'new EU'	.061	-.183	-.139
Constant	.418	2.081	1.661
Pseudo R2	.007	.029	.033

Note: Models shows coefficient results of Poisson regression, robust. Dependent variables are continuous OKS community (0-2), ISC community (0-8), INT community (0-9). Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm) GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards ((PPS) (EU-27 = 100), Source: Eurostat); electorate size (ln natural logarithm) – nb of population in country/nb of seats in EP per country; % of population using internet per country (ln natural logarithm); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1=7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1-7 scale, GUE(1), Greens, S&D, ALDE, EPP, EFD, ECR(7)); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (15) (scale, 0-7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (12) (scale, 0-2); 'new EU' - countries joined EU after 2004 (12) (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0)

Statistical significance *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.001

The Impact of online strategy: Permission to be heard?

As indicated earlier, finally we attempted to assess the extent to which any aspect of the MEPs' communication strategy had any impact on the size of the community they earned. The perfect measure would be to obtain an accurate measure of website visits, proxies for this such as number of searches are too small, so we focus here only on MEPs with social networking profiles or Twitter accounts and assess whether there is any link between the number of fans or followers and communication strategies. This is recognised as an imperfect measure but it can be used as a proxy to some extent. Firstly the main website may both drive traffic and receive traffic from MEPs' auxiliary sites, but in the first instance Internet users may have gained awareness of the profiles through visiting the website. Secondly, as these MEPs are the most proactive it can suggest at the very least that features such as SNS profiles and Twitter

have currency for visitors alongside other strategies, in particular the uses of these tools within an overall communication strategy.

In order to analyze the factors influencing size of community gathered by MEP on Facebook and on Twitter we run two regression models (table 6). Model A shows the influence of previously used factors (personal, party size, country characteristics and EP characteristics) in model B we add to this MEP web performance: marketing features (sum of personalisation, party/EP grouping and E-representation/E-constituency), updating web (nb of entries in November on web site and on blog) and updating SN (number of entries in November on Facebook and Twitter).

Community size standard regression (model A) shows that younger MEPs, from preferential (more competitive and personalised) electoral system, from countries with higher GDP and left wing EP party groups– are more likely to gather more numerous communities around them. The impact of age is again negative as well as, surprisingly, effect of percentage of internet users per country. However both negative effects are diminished if we add website activity features to the model (model b). There is a very strong effect of marketing features (a combination of the use of party related branding, e-representation/e-constituency related features and personalisation) and constant updating of social networks and micro-blogging profiles on size of community. The latter suggests that the relationship is self contained and there is little impact from activity across the main website, and perhaps indicates there is a circular relationship between size of a community and the number of updates (that an MEP who communicates frequently earns an audience but is equally motivated to continue this proactive strategy due to the size of their audience). However, it also seems that MEPs who are generally proactive, who encourage a following as an e-representative, and provide a personalised experience gain followers elsewhere also. We include promotion of party/EP grouping within the model but the low variance here indicates this will have little overall effect. However, the key relationships seem to be political rather than led by communication. While MEPs elected by preferential electoral system appear to be more proactive communicators on a number of measures they also have a wider online following. Taking into account website activity it appears

that being an MEP from a ‘new’ EU country (joined after 2004) has a negative effect on community size.

Table 6: Poisson regression coefficients for online community size (sum of number of friends or followers on Facebook and Twitter)

	Model A	Model B Web site activity
Personal characteristic		
Gender	.262	.221
Age	-.026**	-.017
Party size in national parliament (reference group: fringe)		
Major parties	-.268	-.249
Minor parties	-.091	-.413
Country characteristics		
Preferential voting system	.891***	.741**
GDP 2009	1.183**	.743
Electorate size	0.011	-.009
% of population in country using internet	-2.121**	-2.064
EP characteristics		
EP party ideology scale	-.155*	-.113
Membership in EP commissions	-.003	-.020
Terms-old in EP	-.124	-.166
Terms-new in EP	.133	.193
‘new EU’	-.770	-1.142*
Website activity		
Marketing		.122**
Update web		.005
Update SN		.003***
constant	12.193**	12.836***
Pseudo R ²	.204	.315

Note: Models shows coefficient results of Poisson regression, robust. Dependent variables are continuous (number of friends on Facebook + number of followers on Twitter (0 to 55768)). Independent variables: gender (dummy, 1=women, 0=men); age (in years); preferential voting system (dummy, preferential = 1, otherwise = 0); GDP 2009 (ln natural logarithm) GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) (EU-27 = 100), Source: Eurostat); electorate size (ln natural logarithm) – nb of population in country/nb of seats in EP per country; % of population using internet per country (ln natural logarithm); membership in EP commissions (scale, 1=7); EP party ideology scale (from left to right on 1-7 scale, GUE(1), Greens, S&D, ALDE, EPP, EFD, ECR(7)); Terms-old in EP – number of terms in EP for countries in EU before 2004 (15) (scale, 0-7); Terms-new in EP - number of terms in EP for countries joining EU after 2004 (12) (scale, 0-2); ‘new EU’ - countries joined EU after 2004 (12) (dummy, joined after 2004 = 1, otherwise = 0); marketing (continuous variable sum of personalisation, e-representation and promotion (0-22)), update web (continuous) – sum of number of entries in November on website and blog; update SN (continuous) – sum of number of entries in November on Facebook and Twitter

Statistical significance *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.001

There does, however, seem to be internal consistency around the basic ways that MEPs use Web 2.0 tools and the impact of their communication. While it is difficult to assess a direct causal relationship between the extent to which an MEP is a proactive communicator and whether they attract a following, there is evidence to suggest this is the case. The two most significant correlations were between the number of updates, taken over the month of analysis, and the number of friends (on a social networking site) or followers (on Twitter). Using Spearman’s rho correlation for rank ordered variables we find that the relationship between update frequency on

social networking sites and the number of followers is ranked at .670, with the statistical significance rated at .000. MEPs using Twitter show an even stronger relationship of .881, also with .000 statistical significance. This suggests that there is a value to being a proactive communicator in terms of building an audience, perhaps suggesting that MEPs, like many celebrity users, are able to gather a community of listeners around them providing they offer frequent, interesting and relevant posts.

Table 7: Means for online MEPs compared to Facebook and Twitter users

	Mean GENERAL (n = 440)	MEAN FACEBOOK (n = 201)	MEAN TWITTER (n = 111)
GENERAL WEB PERFORMANCE	19.95	23.36	24.22
Web 1.0	15.50	16.60	16.71
Web 2.0	4.45	6.76	7.50
Information	13.38	15.14	14.98
Engagement	10.65	12.42	13.56
Interaction	4.99	7.12	7.46
Number of entries in November (on the web + blog + Facebook + Twitter)	23.86	39.44	61.65
Number of entries in November (web + blog)	8.40	9.48	9.70
Number of entries in November (Facebook + Twitter)	15.46	29.96	51.95
Personalisation	3.74	4.88	4.49
E-representation	2.19	2.25	2.36
E-constituency	1.81	1.86	1.98
OKS community	.88	.98	.98
ISC community.	1.80	2.48	3.28
INT community	1.79	3.28	3.38
Community size: number of supporters/ friends and followers (Facebook + Twitter)	1103.50	2289.73	2709.33

Using mean scores we may also be able to identify that this is not simply isolated to using one particular tool, such as Twitter or Facebook, in a way that is attractive to an audience. Taking general means for all MEPs, and comparing these to those using Facebook and Twitter we find overall (Table 7) that the mean is higher for those using tools which are likely to engage online audiences. In particular the means shown in bold denote where mean differences are significant. Unsurprisingly users of Facebook

and Twitter are more likely to provide an overall better Web 2.0 experience for site visitors, and one that is both more engaging and interactive than those who retain a single web presence. They also provide more content with updates being more frequent, something that clearly drives some MEPs to use Twitter; though one could equally argue that the nature of Twitter, or ease of access from multiple platforms, can drive more frequent updates than using Facebook for example. Equally these users offer a more personalised experience and use a range of tools to build ideas sharing and interactive communities online.

Conclusions

In terms of both the demonstration of fulfilling roles and overall branding, the findings here are consistent with studies of other elected representatives. Overall they are keen to demonstrate that they are working on behalf of their nations and regions. There is less overall sense that they are keen to adapt their work to a model of e-representation. The majority prefer to inform rather than interact. Thus, mapping internet use across the European Parliament we see sporadic innovations. There is a strong drive to inform, as would be expected from any individual within a privileged role with access to specific knowledge, this is presented in engaging ways but largely feedback is not encouraged. MEPs thus see themselves as being hubs for information, credible sources, but without the motivation to solicit for feedback or harness the power of online networks. MEPs will focus on demonstrating their role as representatives, and discuss a range of broad and specific issues, but this is more about demonstrating effectiveness than connecting to a wider audience. Thus we find hypotheses one and two largely proven.

There is evidence, however, that a new communication strategy is emerging; the standard bearers for this strategy, one compatible with the style of communication facilitated by new technologies and adopted by many users of the online environment. These more social communicators tend to be younger, female, representatives of minor parties and are elected by more personal voting systems, as opposed to party lists, as well as for nations with high internet penetration. These MEPs may be termed as digital natives who see political and electoral benefits from developing their personally engrained uses of digital technologies for professional purposes. These

MEPs are likely to use a range of interactive tools (newsfeeds in a weblog format allowing comments), interactive spaces (social networks), encourage idea sharing (through re-posting) and discussion around ideas. These practices are common online, however not for online legislators. These MEPs are harnessing these to develop greater connections with the online community and perhaps seek a win-win zone where they can enhance their representative capacity through being more in-touch as well as their representational credibility so maximising their electoral support. Therefore hypothesis three is partially proven yet, among the most proactive communicators in the European Parliament we find strong evidence to support hypothesis four.

We can argue that this presents a model of political marketing which simultaneously connects representatives and those they represent while also offering a positive perception of the representative to website visitors. MEPs cannot be described as presenting themselves as discrete party activists, legislators or advocates for their nation or region. These roles merge within their communication to present themselves as effective representatives; spanning all the roles required of them. As an adjunct of their familiarity with the norms of cyberspace, they are also developing a more e-representational model of communication. They are harnessing the network to push out information while also allowing varying degrees of co-creation of their online presences. However, currently we see this only among a minority. But if the trend is generational, perhaps this new form of expressive branding, perception management through communication behaviour (as opposed to simply rhetorical representative communication strategies) may become a widespread feature of political communication.

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