

**Communication by the European Union's executive:  
The case of the Brexit campaign on Twitter**

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*This thesis is dedicated to those who believe in greater  
achievements, who maintain their faith and see in  
the European Union a representation of their dream.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Reality is socially constructed, and individuals cannot abstain themselves from it. Social interactions, constraints and several inputs lead to different actions by different agents. It is with a clear accession of this view that I stand that this thesis is developed based on the several inputs and contributions gathered throughout the research process.

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**THESIS**

**Pedro Fonseca Moniz**

An unexpected event usually channels our attention to the agents involved, rather than considering the agents that should have taken part. This has happened with the EU Referendum campaign, where the European Union did not play a significant role and the spotlight was only placed on the EU institutions after the results were announced. This thesis proposes to study the communication activity of the European Commission, as the executive of the Union, during the campaign period. The main objective is to respond to a guiding research question of how effective the European Commission was in address the British public sphere during the EU referendum campaign. To do so, the research is focused on the institution's communication via social network sites, with an emphasis on Twitter. The communication of the European Commission is analysed through its central and national accounts. Activities on these channels will be analysed in the light of the national context of Euroscepticism and a compared analysis of the activity of political national agents.

**KEYWORDS:** European Commission, Institutional communication, Brexit, EU Referendum, Social Networks, Social Media, Twitter.

## Table of contents

<b>Chapter I – Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
I.1 Time and space definition.....	4
I.2 Definition of the research question.....	5
I.3 Objectives of the study.....	7
<b>Chapter II. Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter III. Social Structure and the European project.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter IV. Political National Agents .....</b>	<b>24</b>
IV. 1. First test.....	25
IV. 2. Mainstream Euroscepticism in the political realm.....	26
IV. 3. David Cameron and the new order Euroscepticism .....	30
<b>Chapter V. European Commission – Communication Strategy.....</b>	<b>32</b>
V. 1. Communication Strategy.....	34
V. 2. Social Media channels .....	36
<b>Chapter VI. Methodology of analysis .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Chapter VII. Communication analysis on Social Network Sites .....</b>	<b>44</b>
VII.1. Social media analysis: Remain vs Leave.....	46
VII. Social media analysis: the European Commission .....	52
European Commission – Central account.....	52
National representation and regional offices .....	60
<b>Chapter VIII. Analysis of Interviews.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Appendix A Social media analysis – European Commission central Twitter account	1
Appendix B Social media analysis – Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom's Twitter account.....	2
Appendix C Social media analysis – European Commission regional office in Northern Ireland's Twitter account.....	3
Appendix D Social media analysis - European Commission regional office in Scotland's Twitter account .....	4
Appendix E Social media analysis - European Commission regional office in Wales' Twitter account.....	5
Appendix F Social media analysis - Commissioner Jonathan Hill's Twitter account...	6
Appendix G Social media analysis - David Cameron's Twitter account.....	7
Appendix H Social media analysis - Nigel Farage's Twitter account.....	8

## Chapter I – Introduction

A succession of British governments<sup>1</sup>, a divided Parliament<sup>2</sup>, a currency decreasing in value<sup>3</sup> and an unstable economy with companies fleeing the country<sup>4</sup> are consequences of the decision taken in the EU Referendum in 2016. For the past three years Britons and Europeans have been witnessing some of the effects of an expected withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

These effects have been felt both at British and European levels, alongside a series of political negotiations and European Summits to define the route where Brexit<sup>5</sup> has the least impact.

In a campaign described as the ‘most divisive, hostile, negative and fear provoking of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Moore and Ramsay, 2017), the future of the United Kingdom and Europe was at stake. National campaigners in the fields of politics, economics and communication took control of the messaging on the benefits or disadvantages of both remain and leave positions.

The impact of this decision in the European Union raises the question: what was the role of the European institutions during the EU Referendum campaign? As a

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<sup>1</sup> David Cameron, Prime Minister at the time of the referendum, resigned, being replaced by Theresa May. Incapable of approving an agreement negotiated with the European Union on the terms of the withdrawal, Theresa May also resigned, leading the way for her successor, Boris Johnson who leads the third government since the referendum. There has been a succession of new cabinet ministers since the constitution of Theresa May's first cabinet.

<sup>2</sup> Parliament has been fragmented by the rise of opposition movements within each of the political parties (The Independent Group, created by former Labour and Conservative Members of Parliament, and European Research Group, created by Conservative Members of Parliament) (The Week, 4 September 2019), and has been incapable of supporting any withdrawal scenario proposed by recent Prime Ministers.

<sup>3</sup> The pound faced its largest collapse in 30 years on the day after the referendum (IG, 2019). The value of the currency has not matched its pre-EU Referendum vote value.

<sup>4</sup> Besides the decrease of the currency's value, the impact of a Brexit scenario has already been felt in the British economy in terms of job loss and business retention. Financial Times estimated in 2018 a cost of £450m a week or £870 a household per year due to Brexit (Financial Times, 23 June 2018)

<sup>5</sup> Brexit is the term commonly used in the United Kingdom, and expanded worldwide with the EU Referendum campaign, for the withdrawal of the country of the European Union. It refers to the ‘British Exit’.

clue to what the position of the executive of the European Union was, in May 2019, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, stated: “It was a mistake not to intervene, not to interfere, because we would have been the only ones to destroy the lies that were circulating around. I was wrong to be silent at an important moment” (European Commission, 07 May 2019).

President Juncker acknowledges that he took a decision and that proponents of the alternative position was more vocal during the campaign. From this 2019 speech, the President justifies the stand taken based on the request by the British Prime Minister David Cameron. This is an alternative explanation to what President Juncker had broadcasted in 2016<sup>6</sup>, during a visit to Berlin. At the time, the non-participation of the President was established “because the European Commission is even more disliked in Britain than in Germany” (POLITICO, 18 May 2019).

Even though the President reflects on his lack of political participation and on the institution as whole, this thesis proposes to comprehend the communication activities of the European executive during this period. The European Commission maintained its regular communication activities, rather than actively campaigning for remain; therefore the guideline research question for this work has been: ‘How the EU directed its communications in the United Kingdom during the EU referendum campaign, and the implications of their communications strategy?’.

Institutional communication actions have to be considered within a framework of content provided by national agents. Understanding the restrictions that the institution might face at national level, due to the narrative developed about European affairs by national agents, will provide a clearer understanding of how communication about Europe was carried out and its implications.

The analysis of these communications will focus on Social Network Sites (SNS)<sup>7</sup>, considering this campaign as the “first digital referendum” (Mullen, 2016). A large volume of information during the campaign was shared via SNS, these channels

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<sup>6</sup> 12 May 2016

<sup>7</sup> Social Network Sites, such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, provide a capacity of addressing a wide audience, as well as obtaining validation or feedback from users reached.



becoming crucial to both inform and persuade citizens to decide between remaining in or withdrawing their country from the European Union.

The effectiveness of communications carried out by the institutions are analysed according to three main elements: the relatability of the content shared with British citizens; the addressing of popular topics mentioned during the campaign and the level of social influence the activities developed had.

The first element is considered within the geographical scope of the messages shared (specific to British audiences, other national audiences or broad European audiences), as well as references to events particularly relevant in the country. When considering popular topics mentioned during the campaign, an analysis of the content shared by lead campaigners, as well as an exploration of the main arguments identified by existing literature (Hobolt, 2016) will be considered and compared with the topics addressed by the European institutions. To understand the success of the messaging of the communication carried out, an assessment of the engagement obtained per message type will provide a clearer picture of the level of success of the approach chosen.

The analysis of digital communication is not restricted to institutional central social media accounts. The European Commission is equipped with an EU-structured representation network, present in each Member State. The activity of the Representation in the United Kingdom, as well as regional offices<sup>8</sup> in this country, will be considered in the analysis, to understand which messages were disseminated specifically to British citizens.

To complement this analysis, and to provide a clearer answer to the question raised, a consideration of the communication strategy adopted by the European Commission has to be included. Therefore, this thesis integrates the results of interviews carried out with EU officials based in Brussels and in the United Kingdom to ensure a more complete answer.

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<sup>8</sup> The Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom is located in London and includes three regional offices, located in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

## **I.1 Time and space definition**

Two main events can be identified as essential to bring the EU Referendum discussion to the mainstream agenda in the United Kingdom, these being David Cameron's campaign during the 2015 United Kingdom general election<sup>9</sup> and the renegotiation of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union.

These two events, beginning in 2015, have their origins much further in the past than the official referendum campaign. By looking beyond the mainstream agenda, civil movements and opposition political parties can be identified as having an agenda to leave the EU for a longer period<sup>10</sup>.

The Electoral Commission (in the United Kingdom) determined the timeframe for the EU Referendum campaign. Therefore, considering a high volume of digital communication and a multitude of topics covered during a prior period, this thesis focuses on the same period. The campaign period was established from the 15th of April 2016 to the day of the referendum (Electoral Commission, 2016).

During the campaign period British citizens were also called to cast their vote for the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly of Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and one hundred and twenty-four councils in England, denominated on mass media as 'Super Thursday' (BBC, 5 May 2016), on the 5th of May 2016. This way, results of overlapping campaign efforts should be expected on the analysis of national agents.

The analysis of digital communication may pose challenges to the space determination for the effect of this analysis. Hence, as a geographical criterion is assumed all that all the content analysed had to be accessible in the United Kingdom's territory during the campaign.

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<sup>9</sup> During the 2015 General Election campaign, David Cameron set the commitment of renegotiating the membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union, followed by a public referendum on its outcome.

<sup>10</sup> As an example: Oxford Campaign for an Independent Britain, established in 1990; United Kingdom Independence Party, formed in 1993; Referendum Party, created in 1994.

## **I.2 Definition of the research question**

This thesis identifies in the study of the EU Referendum campaign an opportunity to explore a different angle, focused on the perspective of the European institutions.

Despite the multiple impacts that the outcome of the referendum may pose to the national reality, it creates a new reality within the European project. First of all, it creates an opportunity for a Member State to disassociate from the European Union for the first time, based on the article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, shifting from a theoretical possibility to a real possibility. Secondly, it raises the question of the role of the European institutions in a referendum that will directly affect them (Bressanelli, Chelotti and Lehmann, 2019). Thirdly, it confronts the institutions on their capacity to communicate with European citizens, as the referendum entails a campaign on the usefulness of belonging to the European Union and puts at stake the capacity of building a European political space<sup>11</sup>.

To analyse the communications of the European Union, a selection had to be made of the institutions to be studied. The multiplicity of political forces in the European Parliament and its differentiated agenda cannot be constituted as a united European position. Looking at the European Council, the aggregated views of European national leaders will not reflect a challenge to the position of the British government, therefore, it will also not be considered. The executive of the European Union, the European Commission, is considered in this research as the supranational institution most capable of addressing the topic<sup>12</sup>. The aforementioned statement of the President of the European Commission, which was not comparable to any communication from the two other institutions, attests to this fact.

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<sup>11</sup> A reference of the political space that the European Union started to build since the Maastricht treaty (Usherwood et Startin, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> The selection of European Union's executive to be studied as a source of communication outputs is not exclusive to this research. Christoph Meyer (1999), when analysing the capacity of communication of the European Union within traditional media also focused on the activity of the European Commission. The author highlights the European Commission as "the communication centre of the EU's institutional set-up" (623)

Defining the focal point of our research, the question posed remains: 'How the EU directed its communications in the United Kingdom during the EU referendum campaign, and the implications of their communications strategy?'. The three-part objective analysis of the effectiveness of its communications is analysed, having as guiding principles the relatability of content addressing British citizens, the capacity and messaging when addressing topics referred during the campaign and the capacity of resonating these messages towards the British audience.

By focusing on the communication of a single institution, we have to encompass the actions taken as part of legitimacy throughput (Schmidt, 2012), in the sense that communication actions enable citizens to assess the efficacy of the institution from political initiatives and positions assumed. Communication instruments are, then, of utmost importance within the context of the institution.

To assess the effectiveness of the actions assumed, as well as the context upon which they were received and restrictions imposed, this thesis elaborates on the British national context. The argument that the EU's official communication is not received upon a blank canvas is assumed and from this proceeds an analysis of what the historical behaviour and positions assumed by national agents have been.

As an additional external factor conditioning EU's communication is the communication activity about the EU Referendum and – at a less relevant level – campaign activities for national elections. This reality implicated changes in the behaviour of national agents, as well as generating an increase in the volume of conversations about the European Union. These two factors are also considered and enrich the capacity of defining a clear answer to the question posed.

Considering the study of the elements, this research moves a step further on the collection of communication data of the European Commission. Based on the approach assumed, the analysis of actions taken is restricted to Social Network Sites. For the purpose of this thesis, the analysis has been restricted to Twitter: comparing the behaviour of the institution's central accounts, as well as national and regional accounts, will provide the picture of the actions taken.

The question raised also implies the understanding that lead to the actions taken. When comparing overall communication efforts to the results obtained from the analysis of the EU's executive digital communication, decisions assumed have to be

understood within their context. This leads to the series of interviews carried out with EU officials, capable of further developing the capacity of understanding the context assumed and the motives to reach such outcomes.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

Whilst defining the route of this research to achieve its main goal of answering the research question posed, several objectives were defined. The designation of objectives to be reached throughout the research creates an opportunity to assess their relevance within the context of each component introduced and analysed in the research.

The first objective relies on the definition of the national context. Different institutions share the same political arena when trying to influence British citizens in the frame set for comprehending the European project.

In line with the view assumed by Alexander Wendt (1987), both agents and the structure where they are integrated share a mutual connection of influence: agents are defined by the structure, which, by itself, evolves with the action of the agents. National contexts support the definition of the positions assumed by national political agents, their capacity of innovating on the positioning assumed and under which elements is their position supported. From all the elements highlighted, it is considered the relation between agents and structure, instead of isolating the political agents by themselves. Their actions cause an impact on different structures where they are integrated and actions assumed result as well from pressures external to the agent's intention.

The event of a political campaign was not abstract to the social structure, which was engaged in the activity of local campaigners. To understand the main tendencies of the social structure, one must consider the feelings shared towards the European Union in recent years, assess if there has been a change, then, compare these results with the overall participation of citizens during the campaign.

The behaviour of national agents with regard to the EU Referendum campaign is also assessed within their political context. The behaviour of pro-Remain and pro-Leave campaigns determines the bulk of content shared by both elements, the

capacity of addressing EU topics, as well as determining the space for the EU's executive to communicate from a non-active campaigner perspective<sup>13</sup>.

The second objective set is to establish an overview of the communication assumed by the European Commission. Although the literature addresses positions assumed by campaigners in a broader sense, and the positioning of the British electorate active on SNS, there is a lack of an overview of the positions assumed by EU institutions. This research intends to fill this gap. Therefore, elaborating a detailed overview of their activity will provide the missing element.

This second objective intends to set the research closer to the answer of the research question posed. Whilst achieving this goal, an analysis of the social network sites of the European Commission will be considered, including the activity of the central Twitter account of the institution, as well as of the Representation in the United Kingdom and regional offices in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff. This compared analysis will determine the answer for our first hypothesis: there is a coordinated approach on digital communication of the institution at different level.

Presented with the assertion of this hypothesis, this research is capable of evaluating if the institution addressed pertinent topics raised during the campaign and which messages were shared on these topics. This analysis raises our second hypothesis that the European Commission was capable of addressing concerns raised during the EU Referendum campaign.

The third objective defined, setting the conditions required to obtain an answer to the research question raised, relies on the definition of the communication guidelines attributed at the institutional level. Besides contributing to a better characterisation of the actions carried out by the institution, understanding the orientations established allows us to understand which elements were taken into consideration for such actions. A final hypothesis which is intended to be tested, is that the EU's executive relied on the results available on SNS for the definition of its digital communication.

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<sup>13</sup> The European Commission assumed itself as a non-active campaigner during this period. All campaigners intended to advocate for one of the positions addressed in the referendum had to register in advance with the country's Electoral Commission.

To reach the third objective, this research relies heavily on the testimonial of EU officials, as no official information in this sense has been made available to the general public.

The capacity of reaching these three main objectives will provide an overview of the digital communication efforts of the EU's executive during this period, allowing us to reflect on the demonstration of political orientation of the institution, as well as their capacity to connect with the British electorate.

## Chapter II. Theoretical framework

Democratic institutions tend to perceive communication within different frameworks (Habermas, 2006)<sup>14</sup>, coinciding in the interest of obtaining political legitimacy through a stronger participation in the public sphere (Meyer, 1999)<sup>15</sup>. The European Commission does not fall short of this perspective<sup>16</sup>.

Whereas this is currently true, this has not always been the case (Meyer, 1999). Attention to public opinion was not considered as a cornerstone neither for the initial steps towards European integration, nor as a barometer for communication activities (Wallace & Smith, 1995; De Vries, 2017).

For the interest of ensuring the continuity of the integration process, a two-folded orientation can be identified: focused on national political elites versus considering European public opinion. The usefulness of the second has been questioned since the beginning of the integration process (Haas, 1958, in De Vries, 2017)<sup>17</sup>, however, it is the evolutionary nature of the European Union and the added political competences of the European institutions that regenerate the debate on the need to address and listen to European citizens (Meyer, 1999).

Hobolt and De Vries (2016) synthesis the understanding of public opinion as part of *permissive consensus* (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970 in Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) in the sense that there is a utilitarian view of the benefits obtained by European citizens, balancing the lack of participation of European citizens in the debate of European affairs. This is not a priority, as it is considered that the benefits obtained are

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<sup>14</sup> Habermas (2006) structures these different approaches into three main models: liberal, republican and deliberative. The first gives a stronger emphasis on the support for individual liberties, whilst the republican model focuses on the political participation and the deliberative on the formation of considered public opinions. (412-413)

<sup>15</sup> Meyer (1999) poses a criticism to how political communication is exercised: focused in informing, marketing and educating, it is not considered as an integral part of governance itself.

<sup>16</sup> On a broader sense, considering also the European Parliament, communication can also be perceived currently as a mechanism to increase the competences of the institutions (Baisée, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> Hooghe & Marks (2007) also reflect on the cost-benefit assumption, making attention to public opinion redundant.



sufficient for a permissive and agreeing stand from European citizens. This theory is contradicted with the emergence of a *constraining dissensus* (Hooghe & Marks, 2009 in Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; De Vries, 2017). When citizens express their disagreement towards the integration process: from this opposition in the public sphere, public opinion has to be considered not only to rehabilitate the image of the institutions, but also to add legitimacy to the integration process.

The rejection of the 1992 Danish Maastricht Treaty referendum and the resignation of the Santer Commission<sup>18</sup> in 1999 are posed as two key elements to shift the design of the European Commission stand on communication (Meyer, 1999). The first goes in line with the second theory mentioned regarding public opinion: Danish citizens expressed through vote their lack of support towards a deeper political integration in the European project. The rejection is does not come from a governing elite, but directly from their base of support. Whereas the second event represent the scrutiny under which the institution is faced upon from the public, being part of the cause of the resignation of the Commission<sup>19</sup>.

Between these two events there is a significant gap of several years: even though efforts were put in place to demonstrate an investment in communication on behalf of the institution – with the creation of DG Communications<sup>20</sup>, for example – a “communication abstention” of the institution (Meyer, 1999: 624) was verified, fearing that public awareness could put at stake the support for further integration. The second event takes the needed validation from this argument.

It is relevant to define the pertinence of political communication within the context of the European Union, particularly of its executive. Whereas public opinion should be understood as collective capacity of shaping perspectives, different from political power that encompasses an authority (Habermas, 2006: 417).

A step back on the communication approach is required, by understanding the definition of the audience that communication actions are aimed at. The concept of

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<sup>18</sup> European Commission in office between 23 January 1995 and 15 March 1999

<sup>19</sup> Meyer (1999) advocates for a link of cause-effect: the mass media coverage of the accusations of corruption, misuse of power and fraud from the European Commission were essential for its resignation.

<sup>20</sup> Directorate General of the European Commission responsible for coordinated communication actions.

*public sphere* in the European Union has to be considered as key element upon which EU's executive must reflect prior to the design of its communication activities.

Schlesinger (2010) presents the argument that the development of a transnational European political community aims for communication that reflects on the same political level (269) – reinforcing the idea of Euro-polity. This approach is elite-oriented, whilst the consideration of a *European sphere of publics* (277) would be more inclusive in the broad sense of European citizens. To consider such an audience, it would entail both the capacity of disseminating the European news agenda and the integration of European affairs as part of their daily news consumption.

These two criteria considered in an isolated fashion would pose a paradox on the definition of a *European sphere of publics*, since Eurosceptic audiences are more prone to consume and debate European content (Van Noije, 2010). This behaviour is explained in the sense that European affairs do not represent a priority to national newsrooms, except for main political events<sup>21</sup>, such as the integration process, European Summits or the coverage of specific European crises. However, for Eurosceptic audiences, the debate about the EU is more intense; therefore, a scrutiny of its daily activities comes in order more often. This does not represent, though, that the coverage of daily activities corresponds to a faithful coverage, but rather a superficial analysis framed within national debates (Van Noije, 2010).

Therefore, a third element of sense of belonging and relatability to the European identity has to be considered within the framework of a *European sphere of publics*.

The reflection on this sphere, however, demonstrates the audience that is aimed to be created. As a parallel to the ever evolving European integration process at institutional level, the integration of Europeans within this framework has also to be developed. Globalisation has contributed extensively for a broader concern of the reality beyond national borders, expanding the scope of debate on public affairs

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<sup>21</sup> Van Noije (2010) mentions the position of the Dutch State Secretary for European affairs, current First Vice-President on European communication: should be based on concrete actions of the European Union, integrating its daily activity in the broad communication, the press analysis from 1990 and 2006 in the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands demonstrates that items on the integration process, EU Summits, rows and crisis are the focal of attention from national press, instead of daily actions

(Castells, 2008). It is within this opportunity, allied with the pertinence of the European Union's social, economic and political roles that the European public sphere should be considered.

As Schlesinger (2010) reflects, this is not a single public, but rather interrelated sphere of European publics (276). This means that a conception of a sphere of European publics has to be understood under the light of the tangling of several spheres of national publics. In 2007, for the European Commission, there was an understanding of the sphere of European publics – rejecting the concept of the *European public sphere* – composed of sub-spaces of national interests, analysing a communication oriented mainly towards journalists who represent those interests (Baisnée, 2007).

The exercise of considering public spheres to which the institutions could communicate, leads us to analyse the arena of communication. Although it is true that Member States preserve their national and international relevance as a state, the European project implies the transfer of political competences. Even considering a multi-level governance approach<sup>22</sup>, European institutions rely largely on the supranational sub-levels of power for the execution of policies (Hooghe & Marks, 2001), as well as for communication of such policies.

To illustrate the situation, considering the extreme scenario of international cooperation, to which the European Commission is a part, the Portuguese government under the Troika's intervention<sup>23</sup> took the bailout case as an opportunity to implement policies favourable to their political views, bypassing national opposition (Moury & Freire, 2013). Internal political constraints of the opposition and the focus of an external intervention to the country empowered such governments in carrying out desired policies. When we shift our attention to Italy, we can see the same model of a

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<sup>22</sup> Multi-level governance in the context of the European integration process in the sense that political authority emerges from different political levels –supranational, national, regional and local. This theory reflects on a redistribution of power and on a cooperative framework for policies to be executed (Hooghe & Mark, 2001)

<sup>23</sup> Three party intervention (International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and European Commission), upon the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding in a bailout scenario.

‘blame game’ (Balfour & Robustelli, 2019), where the Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi shifts the attention of unpopular domestic policies towards European responsibility<sup>24</sup>

These examples demonstrate a tense relationship between governments and European institutions in the shared exercise of policy making and policy execution. Therefore, the shared political arena has to consider eventual conflicting interests between agents.

The agent-structure problematic defined by Alexander Wendt (1987) highlights a theoretical interdependency and relation of mutual implications between agents and the structure: “human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live; and society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors” (336-337). The argument of interdependence and mutual implication defended by Wendt (1987) within the scope of the problematic is intensified in a campaign process: the social structure relies on the behaviours and arguments shared by the agents, whilst agents rely on the structure to obtain an outcome.

Based on this interpretation, it is convenient for the research the definition of both agents and structure analysed. The European Commission, as representative of the interests of the European Union will be considered as the main agent of this research. This behaviour of this agent – as communication outputs – is analysed at different levels, although maintaining the same designation. From the interpretation of the events of this agent<sup>25</sup>, national governments will play a significant role as an agent. The possible conflicting relationship between European institutions and national governments reinforces the importance of this agent. Within the scope of the EU Referendum campaign and, logically, the presentation of alternative positions, pro-Leave campaigners will fall under the scope of the third agent in analysis.

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<sup>24</sup> The governments of Mario Monti and Paolo Gentiloni seem to step away from the ‘blame game’ towards the European institutions (Balfour & Robustelli, 2019)

<sup>25</sup> Reference to the official statement of the President of the European Commission, 07 May 2019.

The social structure upon which these agents compete should be common and in line with the concept of a corresponding sphere of a European public. Two criteria are put in place for the definition of this structure: it is composed by individuals geographically located in the United Kingdom, who have the agency of voting and thus contributing to an outcome of the referendum.

A significant part of the competition of the agents in study during the campaign is related to their capacity of influencing the social structure. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague (1995) coin the concept of 'social influence' as part of campaigners' actions and intent, sensitive to the social context via communication efforts. Considering the interdependence between these two levels, communication has to be in line with the shared beliefs and perceptions at the structural level.

This is particularly evident during a political campaign, the capacity of developing social influence depends on the social context: their behaviours, their understanding of the community, their living conditions and perception of the political agents: "communicative action is never random, actors reason out from agreed-upon precepts of action to establish collectively acceptable rules of conduct for the situation at hand" (Reus-Smit, 2002: 494).

If there is an agreement that the voting mechanism configures part of the accountability to which political agents are submitted (Habermas, 2006), their context will determine the capacity of being influenced or accepting of the arguments of different campaigners.

In practice, several examples can be found to illustrate the importance of adapting communication – or discourse – in line with the evolution of the social context. During the Euro crisis (2007-2015, upon which Member States were faced with the challenges of an incomplete monetary union and a deficient mechanism to monitor national economies, countries such as Germany were faced with internal pressures due to the impact of Southern economic exposure on their contribution. The narrative followed of addressing cultural and political responsibilities upon those countries carried out by Northern European Member States (Matthijs & K McNamara, 2015) can also be interpreted under the light of national scrutiny. The position adopted at European level ensures a political stability at national level.

At a political campaign level, by looking at the 2010 general election campaign in Trinidad and Tobago, it is possible to see the adaptation of communication efforts according to a specific social context: understanding the contrasting behaviours of the two dominant communities in the country, the majority-Indian party develops a communication strategy to reduce the youth turnout of Afro-Trinbagonian voters. This resulted in the victory of the party.

In these examples, the social contexts determine the level of success of the actions and narratives assumed. By contrast the same actions would produce no significant result if they were to be applied in different social contexts. Based on a previous understanding of the specific social context, agents have the capacity of both addressing or moulding the social context. The example shared in Portugal and Italy demonstrates that national political agents were more capable of developing a narrative about the European institutions, which would influence the social structure.

It is, therefore, argued that a constructive framework provides a more comprehensive paradigm of analysis, in the sense that the reality in study is only shared through discourse. This argument has complex concepts on itself. By reality, one has to assume the context of our social structure: what is our knowledge, expectations and sensitivity to political and institutional agents. Considering a new institutionalist definition of 'discourse', assuming it to be not exclusively the ideas shared, but also the interactive nature generated by such ideas (Schmidt, 2008). The messaging has to be understood in its intention, who it is meant to address, its relativity to the overall conversation and what the level of penetration in the social structure is.

The messaging adopted by the agents can never be understood without taking into consideration the understanding within the social structure. An inter-subjective understanding of concepts has to be present, as a guarantee the capacity of discourse between agents and social structure. In practice, general topics, such as immigration, have a specific impact on the community to whom this content is being shared, distinct from its meaning in other regions. As this is the case, this will further dwell on the interdependence between agents and the social structure: both influence each other in the promotion of ideas, the agent needs to be capable of listening to the social structure and the social structure to understand the agent, in order to absorb

messaging maintaining its original intent. By contrast, the lack of inter-subjective understanding of discourse may lead to a weak connection between different national spheres, a frequent occurrence in the EU (Schmidt, 2008).

When addressing the capacity of agents influencing the structure, the relationship seems to depend on the role of the first in detriment to the second. This is not the case by default. Agents also feel engaged to the positions assumed, based on the support obtained by the social structure. Schimmelfennig (2001) elaborates on the rhetorical engagement in political commitments: both rhetorical commitment and rhetorical argumentation lead to rhetorical entrapment<sup>26</sup>. The development of a political narrative, with a broad understanding within the social structure (Matthijs and McNamara, 2015), binds political actors to a position previously assumed. The role, previously explored, of national agents in the perception design about the European institutions, also binds the same agents to maintain a similar rhetoric.

Subsequent positions assumed will inevitably fall under the rhetorical commitment assumed from the start: a common line shared by many national agents of a confrontational relation between national and communitarian interests. The form that the narrative takes represents a rhetorical argumentation. Creating a barrier of access to information from the institutions to the general public manipulates the results and supports the social construction of an ideal.

In sum, there is added value for the European Commission in positioning itself as a communicative agent: due both to objective gains and to the necessity of demonstrating accountability towards different European public spheres. Understanding this plural concept contributes to an added challenge of making the interests of the European Union heard in 28 Member States, without considering a fragmentation of national public spheres into different areas of interest and capacity of receiving information. The example from the Maastricht Treaty demonstrates the clear need of assuming a position on the defence of the European project. Even considering a multi-level governance model, to which European institutions rely also

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<sup>26</sup> Schimmelfennig (2001) analyses the narrative shared about the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. Positions assumed based on the values of the European Union bounded all agents to advocate for an extended enlargement to ten Central and Eastern European countries.

on national authorities, the possible tension among agents reinforces the notion that they cannot be the only agents assuming the responsibility of communicating the European project. It is through discourse that the European project becomes part of the daily reality of European citizens. All agents considered, including national agents, are bound to the positions assumed: their positioning, positioning of their predecessors and members of their party (in the specific case of national agents), represents an added challenge for the European institutions when this can be translated into a doubtful position regarding European affairs.



### Chapter III. Social Structure and the European project

*"We still don't understand what on earth Brexit means"*

Danny Dyer<sup>27</sup>

European institutions have collected data on national public opinion across the years. The Eurobarometer, for example, has become a reference and part of the communication strategy of the institutions. British citizens are not exempted from this exercise, and, through the results obtained on public consultation, an overview of the reflection of the general public sphere can be obtained.

In 2016, less than 50% of the population agreed that membership of the European Union was positive for the country (47%), against an average of 53% of Europeans who responded to the same question. Per se, this result is not particularly significant, as it represents a stagnation relative to the results obtained in the previous year and a higher figure than obtained in the previous nine years. However, when breaking these figures down per age group, we can read that all individuals aged 15 to 54 have demonstrated a more positive answer than in previous years. The same is not confirmed for the group aged 55+, who experienced a significant drop in their perspective of the benefits of membership: their average of 34% represents a drop of six percentage points. The balance of the benefits of being a member of the European Union reflects the same phenomenon: older generations distinguish themselves by 30% from the youngest generations. (European Parliament, 2016)

When considering the attachment to the European Union, the same results are seen: on average, Britons feel attached at 46% to the European Union (against a EU28 average of 51%), whilst the figure for older generations is set at 37%. The perspective of British citizens about their identity also confirms this argument: whilst the majority of Europeans (51% in 2016), consider themselves both nationals and European, Britons consider themselves mainly British (62%) and only 31% consider themselves both European and British. (European Parliament, 2016)

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<sup>27</sup> Extracted from the English actor's interview to BBC Radio (BBC Radio, 23 January 2019)

It is interesting to note that the interest for European affairs is set at an average of 54% for the EU28. However, the figure is higher in the United Kingdom, set at 62%. This is one of the only occasions where the Britons outperform the results of the EU average and it confirms the argument of Van Noije (2010), regarding the attention towards European affairs from Eurosceptic audiences –here the generational distinction is lower at 9 percentage points from the youngest to the oldest generation. From the past nine years analysed, there isn't a visible evolution of the perception of identity shared by British citizens (European Parliament, 2016).

Upon this scenario, which point us to a doubtful position of the British citizens towards the European project – particularly evident among citizens aged 55 and more – the phenomenon of Euroscepticism has to be addressed.

Euroscepticism has been associated to a British tradition, even though consensus cannot be found on the initial use of the expression<sup>28</sup>, finding its way towards other European countries (Hooghe & Marks, 2007, Pierini, 2016). From an etymological perspective, the word refers to scepticism towards European policies or European polity, in the sense of the communitarian project. It encompasses a sense of doubt or disbelief in Europe and European integration, including from critical positions to the European project to determined opposition (Hooghe & Marks, 2007).

For several scholars, the phenomenon of Euroscepticism can be identified due to distinctive causes: from an economic perspective – economic or financial exposure contributes to the rise of Eurosceptic sentiments –, from a cultural and identity perspective – lack of attachment to European identity, European culture posed as threat – and from the lack of confidence in the institutions – lack of confidence in national political representation or exclusive lack of trust in the European institutions (Spiering, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Torreblanca et Leonard; 2013, Pierini, 2016).

The EU Referendum took place in 2016, following the Euro crisis. The first argument would have seemed pertinent if a growing tension between national and European executives were focused on this topic. Meanwhile, a cultural and identity-

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<sup>28</sup> Whilst Hooghe & Marks (2007) refer to the initial use of the expression in *The Economist* on 26 December 1992 to describe the German public opinion, Pierini (2016) identifies a previous use of the word, in 1971 in *The Spectator*, referring to British political agents.

related perspective is suitable with a perspective of Euroscepticism presented by British public opinion.

To understand the possible cultural or identity conflict, it is relevant to define European culture in this sense. Spiering (2015) identifies two interpretations of European culture from a Eurosceptic perspective: European culture as multiplicity of national and regional cultures – breaking with the concept of a single common cultural identity – or, as an alternative, a European culture based on the minimum common elements shared by different national and regional cultures – present as threat to them.

Extending this understanding to the United Kingdom, the recognition a European culture is not compatible with the national: Spiering (2015) defends that British particular institutions, traditions, among other social factors distinguish themselves from continental Europe. From this argument, it is developed the concept of *exclusional Euroscepticism*: it does not reject the European model of cultural integration but does not find a place for the United Kingdom within it (Spiering, 2015).

This narrative of a clear differentiation between Britain and the continent has been mentioned before, even during the Second World War: whilst other European countries rely on continental alliances to ensure their survival, the United Kingdom seeks the support of its Atlantic ally (United States) to ensure its security, having other options – being it more or less effective –, such as the Commonwealth (Spiering, 2004). This is an argument already explored by other academics, particularly when it comes to the prejudice against France and Germany and the prejudice in favour of the Commonwealth (George, 2000). Therefore, from an identity perspective, built from collectively experienced events, differentiations can be found. The redistribution of powers post-Second World War in terms of the international system also inaugurates an identity crisis in the United Kingdom, from which the phenomenon of Euroscepticism cannot shy away (Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Spiering, 2015)

The argument of a conflicting relation based on the perception of distinctive identities is reinforced by the Maastricht Treaty: loss of national sovereignty and, hence, added polity-building capacity of the European Union lead to a clearer implication of European effects in British society.

The British political system, besides being distinctive (therefore part of the British shared identity), has been accused as contributing to increased Euroscepticism. Simon Hix (2007) argues that majoritarian systems, with the tradition of a single party government, such as in the United Kingdom, contribute to a larger polarisation of political views. Views of political parties tend to become more distant from the median voter, particularly at the campaign level. Therefore, the tendency of develop Eurosceptic views within incumbent or opposition parties is greater. As seen as a general phenomenon in the majority of European Member States, incumbent governments tend to set the fault at the European level, as an alternative to assuming political losses (Schlipphak and Treib, 2017).

In consensus systems, parties are forced to form coalitions to form a government, there is a stronger tendency to become closer to the median voter, which, in the majority of the situations, represents a favourable opinion towards the European Union. The impact of the Euro crisis (2007-2015), migrant crisis and lack of solidarity in its resolution may have affected the position of the median voter, especially in southern European countries as Italy. The lack of experience of sharing power of one-party British governments also poses challenges on the acceptance of the intervention of European institutions (Spiering, 2004, Franklin, 1990 in George, 2000).

The first test of the British public support to the European project can be verified in 1975, two years after the integration of the United Kingdom in the European Union. British citizens were invited to cast their vote on a referendum to confirm or reject their support to the European project.

The result of the 1975 Referendum demonstrate a clear support of British citizens to the membership of the country to the European Economic Communities – 67% support. The 1975 referendum can also represent an opportunity to confirm the passive nature of Euroscepticism in the country (Spiering, 2004). Cultural or identity reluctance to the European project was not enough to create an opposition to the economic European project.

Fast forwarding to the 2014 European Parliament elections, the results demonstrate a different scenario: UKIP<sup>29</sup> obtained the highest share of British votes, electing 24 out of the 73 British members of the European Parliament. The support for a hard Eurosceptic party – in the sense that includes in its manifesto the withdrawal of the country from the European Union – represents a call for the lack of appeal from the European project. Even though the elections took place on the outcome of the Euro crisis, analysis demonstrates that it is the opposition to the European polity and the lack of border control that caused the highest support to right-wing Eurosceptic parties: “Voters of the Eurosceptic right appear to be mobilized less by economic concerns and more by their op-position to the EU’s fiscal transfers and open borders” (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016).

From the revision of the literature and analysis of British public opinion, it is possible to assess that the attachment of British citizens to the European project is supported by weak links. To this phenomenon, a Eurosceptic tradition is verified in the country, to which a relation can be seen to the definition of British culture and identity. If this argument were to be considered in an isolated fashion, the British electorate would have shared a lower level of support towards the European project in 1975. However, the purpose of focusing on the UK’s public sphere is to understand the limitations to the pro-European discourse. The argument presented here is that national political agents contributed to the development of the necessary conditions that led to the outcome of the 2016 EU Referendum, in line with the tendency seen in the 2014 European Parliament elections.

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<sup>29</sup> United Kingdom Independence Party

## Chapter IV. Political National Agents

*“If, over 40 years, you are explaining to your general public that European Union is stupid, that there is nothing worth, that you have to leave, that the European Union membership is not bringing any advantages to your populations, you can’t be surprised that the day you ask people: ‘Do you want to stay or do you want to leave?’”*

Jean Claude Juncker, 15 September 2016<sup>30</sup>

Political agents play a significant role in the definition of expectations on European integration. As initially determined, the executive of the EU focused until the 1990s a particular attention to obtaining the support of governing elites, expecting that the benefits from the European project would represent a significant positive gain for Europeans to demonstrate their support – leaving to national political agents the task of communicating European achievements. By considering the general positions of the most vocal British leaders on European affairs, this chapter aims to assess what narrative was developed and shared from these agents.

Rejectionist attitude in the country has been visible since the 1950s (George, 2000, Spiering, 2004, Hobolt, 2016), particularly defended by the Labour party (George, 2000), even before the UK’s participation in the European Coal and Steel Community. The integration of the United Kingdom in 1973 in the European Economic Communities (EEC) follows a third attempt at joining it, after a double French rejection on its accession – highlighting a distinction of European vision between De Gaulle and the British.

The distinctive views of British integration in the European project from non-party groups is visible at different spectrums of the British political game (Usherwood, 2002). Both Labour and the Conservative Parties had organised factions within their political structures advocating for a withdrawal of their country from the EEC. Reference to these movements is relevant, due to the elitist nature of the European integration: up until 1979, European citizens were not consulted at a European-wide scale to share their views on the process, remaining a top-down process. This leads to

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<sup>30</sup> Extract from President Juncker’s interview to three YouTubers, organised by the European Commission (European Commission, 2016a)

a better access of information to party leaders and interest groups, who are not only better informed than the general population (Hix, 2007), as they also have the capacity of multiplying their message.

#### **IV. 1. First test**

Two years after British acceding to the EEC, the Labour government of Harold Wilson called for a referendum on the country remaining. The context of the referendum contributes to the understanding of later events in Britain. The minority government campaigning for the 1974 general elections, pledged to renegotiate the terms of the British integration – this promise has a relevant impact on the campaign of the party, which was to be replicated later in British political history by David Cameron.

Considering the analysis carried out by Tsebelis (2016) on the reference to European issues for internal political gains in contemporary Greek politics, a similar intention can be seen in the UK from a very early state of integration. The mentioned division within party structures can be resolved with a public consultation, as to assess the democratic legitimacy of each position.

The majority government of Harold Wilson, which had shown his reservations in the accession to the ECC in 1970s (Spiering, 2004), hosts the referendum. Readings from the results have been explored to demonstrate a non-binding Euroscepticism from British constituency, by confirming a passive nature of Euroscepticism in the country (Spiering, 2004).

A referendum can cause the effect of confirming the interest to further develop a policy path proposed by the government. This is often the case for referendums in social matters, namely the legalisation of the abortion or same-sex marriage. However, in this situation, the referendum is used as instrument not to deepen the political integration of the United Kingdom in the short future, but rather to confirm an action taken two years before – it serves to confirm the *status quo*. Non-party groups composed by members of British political parties, such as Conservative Way Forward, Conservatives Against a Federal Europe and Labour Euro-Safeguards Campaign were, above all, a means to determine the position of the party (Usherwood, 2002).

It is of the utmost importance to mention that the umbrella organisation for the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EEC in the 1975 Referendum campaign, gathering the support of marginal members of political parties as well as outside of the party sphere, The National Referendum Campaign, was swiftly broken up after the referendum (Usherwood, 2002), remaining isolated groups advocating the same goals.

Wellings (2012) goes further in his analysis of Euroscepticism among political actors. For him, the referendum of 1975 on the accession of the United Kingdom in the European Economic Communities already posed a challenge to the *status quo* on the role of institutions: the Parliament had to consider the public consultation to review its previous decision, instead of assuming the capacity of the chamber to represent the interests of the British electorate.

#### **IV. 2. Mainstream Euroscepticism in the political realm**

Another mark on Euroscepticism in the country has been the mandates of Margaret Thatcher (Spiering, 2004, Usherswood, 2002, George, 2000). If Labour's doubts about European integration were known to the public, it is the Tory Thatcher who leads the way for Conservative Members of Parliament. For Margaret Thatcher, a growing transition of power from national to supranational level posed a threat to nationhood, without any benefit in concentrating power away from nation states, as she mentioned in Bruges in 1988. "I want to see us work more closely on the things we can do better together than alone. Europe is stronger when we do so, whether it be in trade, in defence or in our relations with the rest of the world", shared the Prime Minister.

The contention between the Prime Minister and the European Commission started with the British contribution to the communitarian budget – to which, she acknowledges her victories in reducing the communitarian budget on agriculture (Thatcher, 1993). This conflict that can be posed at the policy level of ideas, will shift to the ideological level of ideas with her intervention in Bruges. This intervention, having the signature of the Single European Act as a background, legitimised the turn of the



Conservatives, including through the creation of the 'Conservatives Bruges Group' (Usherwood, 2002).

The not-so-subtle critic of Margaret Thatcher at the time of negotiations of the Maastricht Treaty is distinctive from an anti-Marketeer. As Eurosceptics, anti-Marketeers advocated the absolute withdrawal from the EEC (Spiering, 2014, Wellings, 2012), which is important to mention as something different from Thatcher's position. The position set for the United Kingdom by Thatcher has to be considered in light of the happenings at the time. In her memoir (1993), the Prime-Minister recognised a different pace from other European government leaders. At the time of the negotiations for the Maastricht Treaty and further deepening of the European Union, the British position has been one of distant interest regarding this path. Margaret Thatcher creates the opportunity to evolve from an "anti-European dimension to a nascent European nationalism" (Wellings, 2012). This position opens the door for vocal oppositions within the Conservative party to have a contrary view – including at the ideological level – against the European project, normalising the position on the mainstream conversation (De Vries and Edwards, 2009 in Hobolt, 2016): "Contrary to much of continental Europe, Euroscepticism has found a home in mainstream parties" (Hooghe & Marks, 2007: 122).

For our understanding, it is particularly important to see the confrontation between an overall evolution of the European institutions having as a national backdrop the rejection of the national leader. For some, this has been the cause of Margaret Thatcher's resignation from the British government (Fontana and Parsons: 2015).

The subsequent signature of the Maastricht Treaty has been made possible with several opt-out points raised by the United Kingdom. This means that, while binding the country to an evolutionary process of the EEC to the European Union, clear exceptions have been approved for the United Kingdom and Denmark .

However, considering the strong positions already assumed and the strengthening of Eurosceptical positions within parliamentary representation, the signature of the Treaty has been identified as the source of internal opposition within Sir John Major's party (George, 2000), leading to the fall of his government. Whilst the incumbent party of the latter country would rather maintain the status quo to avoid

the political turmoil, the former preferred the status quo to a deeper integration of the European Communities (Hug et König, 2000).

The economic dimension of the Maastricht Treaty has been fairly debated, in particular regarding the European Monetary Union. This point has been clarified by the British government as an opt-out clause – whilst ‘(...) British parties suggest that all of them moderately favour further political integration, they were heavily split concerning additional economic integration.’ (Hug et König, 2000: 110). Even though the treaty has been signed having this consideration, the membership of the single currency became one of the topics of renewed opposition groups, namely within the Conservative party and the Referendum Party (Usherwood, 2002). This opposition has taken the shape of absolute rejectionist – claiming the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union – or the shape of Euroscepticism in the course taken by the European institutions, without claiming the withdrawal of the country .

Single-issue Eurosceptical political movements gained particular importance from the 1990s. The evolution of European integration, namely at the political level including the United Kingdom, stimulated the formal birth of new movements, at a time when political elites, at governmental and parliamentary levels, presented their doubts about the European institutions and the reinforcement of their powers.

#### New Labour

From 1997 to 2007, Tony Blair’s government introduces a new vision of the Labour party in the United Kingdom, including a different approach for Europe. The British Prime-Minister has been identified as a Europeanist, placing the European Union in the conversation about British foreign policy priorities, as well as confronting the ideals left by his Conservative predecessors.

There are two key elements that will restrain the activity of a pro-European Prime-Minister: first of all, by seeking for a modernised image of the United Kingdom, including through the promotion of democratic values with British participation in the Iraq War, this has ‘suffocated his leeway to expound a Europeanist foreign policy’ (Daddow, 2013: 218). Secondly, after the long narrative integrated by the Conservative party in the public debate on the confrontation national vs. European, Tony Blair was limited in the attention and interest from the public on the topic (Daddow, 2013). This is also relevant on the press dimension of the pro-European conversation: newspapers

were presenting a vision against the European Union that was confronting the view of the Prime-Minister (Usherwood, 2013), leaving him fewer opportunities to convince his constituency.

A pro-European narrative of the Prime-Minister should not be mixed with an absolute change in the policy stand of the country – that did not happen. When looking at the extended expansion of the EU to ten central and eastern European countries, the British perspective has been on the front-lead of the accession of as many countries as possible – many interpret this as sign of having more political actors who will difficult the task of deepening EU's integration.

The unsuccessfulness of the New Labour approach to the European Union faced its end during the Gordon Brown administration, when the United Kingdom-United States of America has been mentioned as the most important bilateral relation of the country, even considering its integration in the European Union.

#### **IV. 3. David Cameron and the new order Euroscepticism**

The evolution of the positions assumed by different political leaders has constrained the position of the future governments. This is partially the framework on which the referendum has been presented. For many scholars (Gifford, 2016, Hobolt, 2016, Green et Prosser, 2015) the coalition leadership of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats (2010-2015), the rise of nationalist parties (such as UKIP) and the position assumed by David Cameron on the campaign for general elections in 2015 cannot be ignored regarding their effects on the EU Referendum campaign.

The results of the 2010 general elections result in the first political coalition since 1945<sup>31</sup>. These elections had the 2008 economic and financial crisis as a background<sup>32</sup>, resulting in the loss of the Labour party and dispersed electoral results. This is particularly relevant on the position that Cameron will assume regarding European topics: close to his Conservative predecessor: on the ideological level, the Prime Minister will continue on developing the line drawn by Thatcher, focusing on an intergovernmental cooperation at the European level, with an oppositional position regarding supranational solutions presented, while on a programmatic level, he and his cabinet will follow a logic of distance and differentiation from Eurozone countries (Gifford, 2016).

The position assumed by Cameron attempted to reach a disperse electoral mass that was growingly fleeing to anti-establishment political groups. In 2013, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), managed to obtain over 20% of the votes<sup>33</sup> in British local elections, becoming the most popular party in the following elections to the European Parliament (Rallings and Thrasher, 2014). These results combined with a decreased popularity of the Conservative's coalition party increased the Eurosceptic

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<sup>31</sup> The coalition with the Liberal Democrats was particularly costly for the latter. The popularity of the party, which represented the third political force in the United Kingdom, fell significantly within the first months of government (Green et Prosser, 2015). It also helps us understand the political space left for political parties anti-establishment.

<sup>32</sup> In the Spring Eurobarometer of 2010, only 56% of the population inquired characterised their personal job situation as good (EB73, available in: [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73\\_vol1\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73_vol1_en.pdf))

<sup>33</sup> UKIP obtained 27,49% of the votes, followed by Labour with 25,40% and then Conservative party with 23,93%. (Rallings and Thrasher, 2014)

position within the party and within the country – if, by opposition, the referendum of 1976 served to calm down Eurosceptic movements in Britain, the election results presented so far increased the role of opposition voices.

The success of UKIP conditions the activity of incumbent political actors. Its success can, in retrospective, be associated with a multitude of issues approached, connected with its main topical agenda of the British withdrawal from the European Union, on issues such as immigration (Green et Prosser, 2015) or crime<sup>34</sup>.

To fight the rising tendency of new players and to compete with traditional political actors, in the 2015 elections, David Cameron committed himself to renegotiating the integration of his country in the European Union and committed himself to proposing a referendum on its withdrawal. The narrow absolute majority obtained by the Conservatives bound them to the promises made during the campaign.

In the short term, the strategy applied by Cameron led him to victory in the elections, obtaining an internal position more comfortable than before. Still, by turning the participation of the United Kingdom in the European Union into a key topic of his programme, Cameron also opened the door of the mainstream debate to anti-establishment political parties. UKIP, which would be a key player during the 2016 EU Referendum, has been seen as the “main beneficiary” of the elections by obtaining the political support from 2010 Conservative voters, working class voters defecting from Labour and the collapse of the far-right British National Party (Green et Prosser, 2015). The geographical disparity of the votes, as well as the formulation assumed on the seat distribution did not grant a substantive result for the party in the British parliament, however, this would have a reflection in the 2016 referendum.

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<sup>34</sup> Crime has been reported for the first time as one of the main concerns of the British citizens on the Spring Eurobarometer of 2010 (idem)

## Chapter V. European Commission – Communication Strategy

*“The Commission is not a technical committee made up of civil servants who implement the instructions of another institution. The Commission is political. And I want it to be more political. Indeed, it will be highly political. Its make-up must reflect the plurality of the majority of ideas which take shape.”*

*Jean Claude Juncker, 2014<sup>35</sup>*

The analysis of this thesis is founded on the argument that communication is essential for the European project. The literature analysed before has demonstrated that communication has become a legitimacy instrument for the European Commission, by allowing a promotion of its values and the understanding of public opinion of different European public spheres<sup>36</sup>.

Having established the path that lead to an increased awareness of the communication within the institution, it is important to understand what role it plays within the institution, how it is structured and how technical and political elements of the Commission interact with communications activities. Although each department of the European Commission (Directorate General) has a level of communication autonomy<sup>37</sup>, the focus towards broad public European spheres is aggregated at three levels: Directorate General for Communications (DG COMM), Spokesperson’s Service and European Commission Representations:<sup>38</sup>. These three elements play complementary tasks, often in coordination with each other.

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<sup>35</sup> Extracted from President Juncker’s opening statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session on the 15 July 2014 (Juncker, 15 July 2014)

<sup>36</sup> Communication is here understood as both the capacity of addressing European citizens and listening to their concerns for the adaptation of policy-making.

<sup>37</sup> Each Directorate General has a communication unit, organises actions for specific audiences or for the general public. Each of these departments also have specific communication channels, such as dedicated accounts on SNS.

<sup>38</sup> Representations are included in this listing, even though they are part of Directorate General for Communications. However, the more political nature given to Representations adds a significant value to this analysis that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, this listing does not include Europe Direct Contact Centres, due to its disperse logic and lack of penetration within United Kingdom’s territory.

With President Delors' Commission, a new impetus was given to communication activities<sup>39</sup> (Gramberger, 1997 in Meyer, 1999). President Juncker follows a similar line by attributing an even more significant relevance to the department. Based on the argument of the political nature of the European Commission (European Commission, 2016b), President Juncker reinforces the centrality of communication: DG COMM falls under the direct authority of the President.

The impact of this change is not only felt at Headquarters level, but also at national level, as Representations are part of the Directorate General for Communications: "Representations always had a close link to the Spokesperson's service, a Presidential service, but Juncker has brought them together in his cabinet. A weekly reporting mechanism, coordinated by DG COMM, to the President's cabinet has been implemented, for example", mentioned EU official (1/2), focusing on the intelligence domain expected from the Representations.

The closeness of communication activities to the President's cabinet, together with the political orientation assumed by the President increases the political dimension of communication activities of the institution, thus its political responsibility. Activities assumed at the level of headquarters or in the Representations are now part of the Presidential Service, therefore closer to the political nature of the institution, rather than the administrative one<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> President Delors, in 1994, establishes the portfolio of communication as the exclusive focus of Commissioner João Pinheiro de Deus, with the ambitious plan of reinforcing the communication capacity of the institution. The lack of support both from his colleagues and President Delors resulted in a frustrated attempt (Gramberger, 1997 in Meyer, 1999), although attributing an increased budget for the department.

<sup>40</sup> Assuming a classical division of administrative (civil servants) and political (college of Commissioners) bodies of the institution.

## V. 1. Communication Strategy

Listed the main bodies responsible for corporate communication of the institution<sup>41</sup>, the communication strategy drawn represents the commitment assumed on delivering a closer mechanism of accountability. Even though the tasks of each of the three structural bodies mentioned are distinct, the annual strategy presented by the Directorate General for Communications attributes an overview of objectives and actions to be carried out in the representation of the institution's interests.

A general message transmitted from the strategy presented is "the need to connect with citizens" (European Commission, 2016b: 3). The dimension of closeness towards citizens has been a key player assumed not only by the Commission, but also by the European Parliament, including on the push for the Spitzenkandidaten process<sup>42</sup>, which led Jean Claude Juncker to the presidency of the institution.

The attention to institutional communication becomes part of a throughput legitimacy. Following the formulation of the term by Vivian A. Schmidt (2012), the concern for transparency and accountability through communication contributes to this effect. Openness of the institution can be achieved by a clearer communication effort of the institution, being digital communication an opportunity to communicate directly to European citizens and involve them in the process<sup>43</sup>.

Each Commission presents a list of priorities upon which the mandate should be focused. For President Juncker's Commission, ten priorities<sup>44</sup> serve as steering lines

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<sup>41</sup> Considering that Commissioners also have a role in communication activities, be it in cooperation with the Spokesperson's Service and Representation, or by initiative of their cabinet on social media channels

<sup>42</sup> Presentation of a candidate to the presidency of the European Commission at the European Parliamentary elections. Process carried out for the first time in 2014, with the proposal of Jean Claude Juncker as candidate for the European People's Party. The majority of votes obtained by this party contributed to the election of Jean Claude Juncker to his position.

<sup>43</sup> First Vice President Frans Timmermans has been an advocate of the European Citizens' Initiative, a grassroots based civil initiative to present legislative proposals. The communication of these initiatives is mainly carried out online and the European Commission provides online support as well to foment it.

<sup>44</sup> Jobs, growth and investment; Digital Single Market; Energy union and climate; Internal market; A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union; A balanced and progressive trade policy to harness globalisation; Justice and fundamental rights; Migration; A stronger global actor; Democratic change.



for the activity on the five years of mandate. These are, inevitably, pivotal for communication purposes, even though at different levels per each body. For DG COMM: this should be the primary and almost exclusive focus for central communication channels of the institution; the Spokesperson's service enjoys a wider autonomy in the sense that is more connected to the political cabinets, with the capacity of being proactive or reactive to events; at the national level, Representations entail a stronger component of intelligence, as they feed the information needed to the cabinet of the President. Their communication activities should be in line with DG COMM.

On the strategy presented, the communication efforts coming from DG COMM (headquarters) are focused on the production of content, rather than on the assessment of the interest of European citizens towards the institution at the policy level. When confronting the strategy with the annual report (European Commission, 2017), Key Performance Indicators<sup>45</sup> also include the assessment of EU citizens' image of the European Union (Eurobarometer analysis) and number of visitors to corporate websites. Even though the information shared remains limited – general figures obtained by the institution, instead of results per department, for example –, it demonstrates the intention of showcasing the institution's attention to citizen's opinions and behaviours.

Professor Catherine De Vries (2017) highlights a dichotomy between relying on public opinion versus an allying with political governing elites to drive European integration process – Haas's (1958, in De Vries, 2017)) argument that the focus should be on the latter, rather than the former. However, assessing the communication approach of the institution, it is not possible to determine a clearly defined dichotomy. Communication activities do not demonstrate a clear definition of collaboration with European citizens or considering its general opinion. However, it plays a role on the definition of such opinion. Therefore, regardless of its individual results, the institution demonstrates interest in national debate and perspectives of the activity carried out at the European level.

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<sup>45</sup> Perceived as the mechanism of objective definition of communication goals

## V. 2. Social Media channels

In 2016, the European Commission assessed the added value of social media communication on its institutional communication strategy, highlighting an “increasingly prominent role in social interaction, public dialogue and democratic life (...)” (European Commission, 2016b: 5). As one can only expect, the mention of ‘social media’ is not exclusive to a single channel<sup>46</sup>, but, as an example, the Twitter account of the institution was created in June 2010. The growing importance of communication to this Commission has already been demonstrated at the presidential level. Now at the administrative/technical level, the relevance of a social media active participation is reinforced.

Across this strategy document, one can also read the intention of ‘increasing digital skills of DG COMM staff’ (European Commission, 2016b: 14). It is not possible to make a strict connection with social media activity; however this is a relevant remark to highlight.

There is a commitment on this strategy to steer the digital communication of the institution, mainly on the central corporate channels, to a more political communication, to improve engagement with the public and to increase the quality of content (European Commission, 2016b).

Due to an expectation of more tailored interaction with EU citizens, social media activities of the European Commission’s representations are also considered within the institution’s strategy. There is a specific mention to the ‘appointment of “digital leaders’ (European Commission, 2016b: 5), as technical experts in the field of digital communication to collaborate with the institution<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Several strategy documents from 2015 to 2017, list at least five different social media networks: Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn and YouTube

<sup>47</sup> The position of ‘Digital leaders’ encompasses a view of obtain expertise from outside members, instead of relying on the existing technical staff (EU functionnaires).

## **Chapter VI. Methodology of analysis**

Digital communication of the European Union, through its executive, is the object of study of this thesis. The purpose is to describe the capacity of the institution to reach the British public sphere, within the context of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign. For the purpose of analysis of this case study, two different types of methodologies have been applied: based on the analysis of actions taken on the official accounts of the organisation on Social Network Sites (SNS) and based on the testimonial of EU Officials working in the field of communication for the institution.

The first methodology intends to confirm – or deny – the first two hypotheses presented: 1) There is a coordinated approach on digital communication of the institution, in line with the strategy drawn; 2) the European Commission was capable of addressing concerns raised during the EU Referendum campaign. The definition of the hypotheses aimed to be tested leads the selection of the officials accounts on SNS chosen.

Different levels of communication are pertinent to analyse within the objective of reaching a national public sphere: central level, from which the majority of the digital communication is disseminated, and at the national and regional level, through the European Commission Representation in the United Kingdom and regional offices. The comparison of the activity between these two levels will shed some light on the capacity of implementing the strategy defined and of internal communication of the institution's messages.

Several scholars (Polonksi, 2016; Mullen, 2016; Llewellyn and Cram, 2016; Usherwood and Wright, 2016) have analysed the overall digital communication coverage of the EU Referendum, both from a political-agent perspective and from a social-structural perspective. Confronted with the identification of arguments shared during the campaign (Hobolt & Wratil, 2016; Hobolt, 2016), the intention is to confirm its application on the digital communication of campaign leaders on SNS.

This analysis has an institutional focus on the content published on official accounts. It provides only a snapshot of how different positions were shared and topics addressed on SNS. To elaborate this analysis, the selection of SNS is narrowed to

Twitter: besides being commonly used in previous academic researches, this network is common to all agents in study. Its open structure has been one criterion shared by scholars on academic research (Ahmed, 2017), allowing us access to a more comprehensive amount of data.

For the purpose of this analysis, it matters to highlight that data collected is limited to the content still available on the channels chosen. Paid advertising on the same channel, targeting specific audiences and not visible on the accounts analysed, is not taken into consideration. Promoted activity<sup>48</sup> might be applied to existing content available on the feed of users analysed, even though there is no indication of such<sup>49</sup>.

The collection of social media data for this analysis was carried out from April to July 2019. Therefore, individuals responsible for the management of these accounts may have removed some of the messages shared two years before. A total of 1 130 tweets have been analysed from six Twitter accounts: Two accounts from national political agents – Nigel Farage<sup>50</sup>, 309 tweets; David Cameron<sup>51</sup>, 118 tweets – and four European Commission accounts – European Commission’s central account<sup>52</sup>, 434 tweets, Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom<sup>53</sup>, 196 tweets, Regional office of the European Commission in Belfast<sup>54</sup>, 13 tweets, Regional office of the European Commission in Edinburgh<sup>55</sup>, 43 tweets and regional office of the European Commission in Cardiff<sup>56</sup>, 17 tweets.

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<sup>48</sup> Investment on paid advertising on SNS

<sup>49</sup> This is a limitation on the capacity of carrying out this research. The journalist Carole Cadwalladr (2019) highlighted the vast use of promoted content during the campaign, which is only visible by audiences targeted.

<sup>50</sup> @Nigel\_Farage, available in [https://twitter.com/Nigel\\_Farage](https://twitter.com/Nigel_Farage)

<sup>51</sup> @David\_Cameron, available in [https://twitter.com/David\\_Cameron](https://twitter.com/David_Cameron)

<sup>52</sup> @EU\_Commission, available in [https://twitter.com/EU\\_Commission](https://twitter.com/EU_Commission)

<sup>53</sup> @EULondonRep, available in <https://twitter.com/EULondonrep>

<sup>54</sup> @EUOfficeNI, available in <https://twitter.com/EUOfficeNI>

<sup>55</sup> @EUCommScotland, available in <https://twitter.com/EUCommScotland>

<sup>56</sup> @EUCommWales, available in <https://twitter.com/EUCommWales>

The collection of data followed a series of general and particular criteria established from the start. The different nature of the two main groups of agents in the study required particular attention to the content type shared and thus differentiation in the data collection. Data was collected and categorised under six main categories: date, interactions, geographical scope, understandability of the messages, action type and content type. The two last criteria represent the most significant differentiations among agents studied.

General criteria applied			
<u>Date</u>	<u>Interactions</u>	<u>Geographical scope</u>	<u>Understandability of the messages</u>
To assess the volume of content shared throughout the campaign	To understand the capacity of reaching public spheres	To determine which audiences are mentioned or targeted from messages shared	Text shared on these Twitter accounts was evaluated through the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. This provides a readability score to the messages analysed.  To calculate, text was analysed using the corresponding formula <sup>57</sup> .
	Sum of reactions (likes), shares and replies to messages shared	UK	
		UK/EU	
		UK/International	
		Member(s) State(s) other than UK	
		EU	
		EU/International	
		International	

**Table 1 General criteria set for content analysis**

Action type	Content Type	
Campaigning – EU Referendum	General campaigning	
	Issue-based	Immigration control
		Cost of EU Membership
		Security Implications

<sup>57</sup>  $0.39 \left( \frac{\text{Total words}}{\text{Total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left( \frac{\text{Total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$

		Lack of knowledge and trust
		Exposure to a single market
		Risk of extending communitarian areas
		Lack of trust in the EU success
		Lack of information
		Economic risk of Brexit
		Economic stability in the EU
		Economic benefits from the EU
Campaigning – ‘Super Thursday’	Public figure support	
	No trust in Prime Minister or Government	
International events	Critics to opposition	
Communicating on domestic events		
Other	Call for voter registration	

**Table 2 Criteria set for content analysis of national political agents**

Action type	Content Type		Language
Informative	European Commission’s priorities	Jobs, growth and investment	Options restricted to the 24 EU official languages
		Digital single market	
		Energy union and climate	
		Internal market	
		A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	
		A balanced and progressive trade policy	
		Justice and fundamental rights	
		Migration	
		A stronger global actor	
		Democratic change	
		Humanitarian aid	
Instructive	Institutional event		
	Institutional communication		
	Commissioner’s visit to the UK		
	Debunking ‘Euromyths’		

**Table 3 Criteria set for content analysis of institutional European agents**

The effort has been used to keep the structure of different Twitter accounts analysed as similar as possible, respecting the purpose of distinctive content. Starting from the type of action, for David Cameron and Nigel Farage, the criteria have a stronger focus on their objectives as political agents within a national sphere—campaigning for Remain/Leave, campaigning for ‘Super Thursday’ elections and International events. When analysing the accounts of the European Commission, the pertinent distinction is on the type of interaction that the institution is seeking with the communication element. From examples of social media communication analysis (Segesten & Bossetta, 2016), the focus on these elements adds a particular attention to the objective of the messages disseminated – focused on informing citizens or requesting an action from them.

Content on campaigners accounts is analysed in more detail, to clarify the volume of issue-based content, general campaigning and critics to opposition/*status quo*.

To understand the capacity of interaction of the accounts of the European Commission with the British audience, as well as the attempts of campaign leaders to steer the debate to European affairs, the geographical scope is analysed. Among national, national/European, national/international, European, European/International and International. The same elements are considered in terms of language, assuming the twenty-four official languages<sup>58</sup> of the European Union. A. D. Segesten and M. Bossetta (2017) introduce a typology of content analysis divided between a) original content without a clear instruction to the user (informative) and original content with an instruction to the user (instructive): this has been included on the analysis of the activity of the European institutions to allow us to have an overview of the action type of the message sent. This was not applied to national campaigners, as during the campaign period calls to action are expected: both at immediate level – share our message, give us your support – and at the long-term level – vote on our cause.

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<sup>58</sup> Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovakia, Slovenia, Slovene, Spanish and Swedish.

The level of acceptance of the content shared on all accounts analysed will be assessed through the interactions<sup>59</sup> obtained per each message. This will serve as an indication of the content shared.

With the criteria set, the analysis of institutional Twitter activity aims to answer three essential questions: Which topics deserve more attention on the channels of the institution? Is there an overlapping of topics or actions among the accounts from lead campaigners and the institution? And how sensitive is the institution to national events and audiences.

Breaking down to specific questions, the frequency of topics addressed, significant happenings that shape communication efforts and event coverage will determine an answer to the first question posed.

The analysis of most popular topics addressed on both accounts is essential to understand if concepts shared on most popular topics are understood in a similar fashion. Assessing the language, scope and complexity of the content shared will provide the answer to the sensitivity of national and general audiences, as well as national happenings highlighted.

When providing a clear answer to these sub-questions, the evidence of a common strategy shall be visible among different communication efforts, being it at a campaign or institutional level. Comparing these different approaches will demonstrate how the European Commission was positioned within the digital context of this discussion.

A third hypothesis has been presented that cannot be confirmed through the analysis of digital communication activities: the EU's executive relied on the results available on SNS for the definition of its digital communication. To test this hypothesis and to obtain a clearer description of the strategy adopted by the European Commission on SNS, a series of interviews were carried out.

The first criterion set to select interviewees for this purpose was the current or past activity of the interviewee in communication activities in the EU's executive. Interviewees can be categorised into three main profiles: EU officials (3 people)– for

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<sup>59</sup> Number of reactions (likes), shares and replies to the message published.



interviewees who provided background information –, EU officials working at the spokesperson's service (1 person) and EU officials working at the national representation and regional offices<sup>60</sup> (3 people).

As the goal with these interviews is to obtain an overview of the activities carried out by the institution, focusing at an organisational level, we have excluded a quantitative method of research – this has been partially applied in our evaluation of social media results. Therefore, our interviews fall under the qualitative method of research.

Having this in mind, as well as the political sensitivity to the topic, and personal considerations of it, unstructured interviews would provide a great amount of data. A strong intention was seen from the first contact with the majority of interviewees to address the topic of EU referendum, instead of the communication approach of the institution.

Five semi-structured interviews were carried out. Similar questions were prepared prior to each interview, differing on the scope of activities assumed by the subject interviewed. The intention is to steer the interview, whilst avoiding any constraint to the line of thought. For two other interviews, interviewees were only able to address written questions – which implied a closed-structure type of interview. Despite this limitation, both interviewees – Mark English and Commission Spokesperson, were available to answer to follow-up questions.

For better assessing the data collected from these interviews, three main topics have been highlighted: 1) strategy on the communication during the EU Referendum campaign, 2) coordination between different multi-levels within the institution and 3) acknowledgement of the overall conversation during the campaign.

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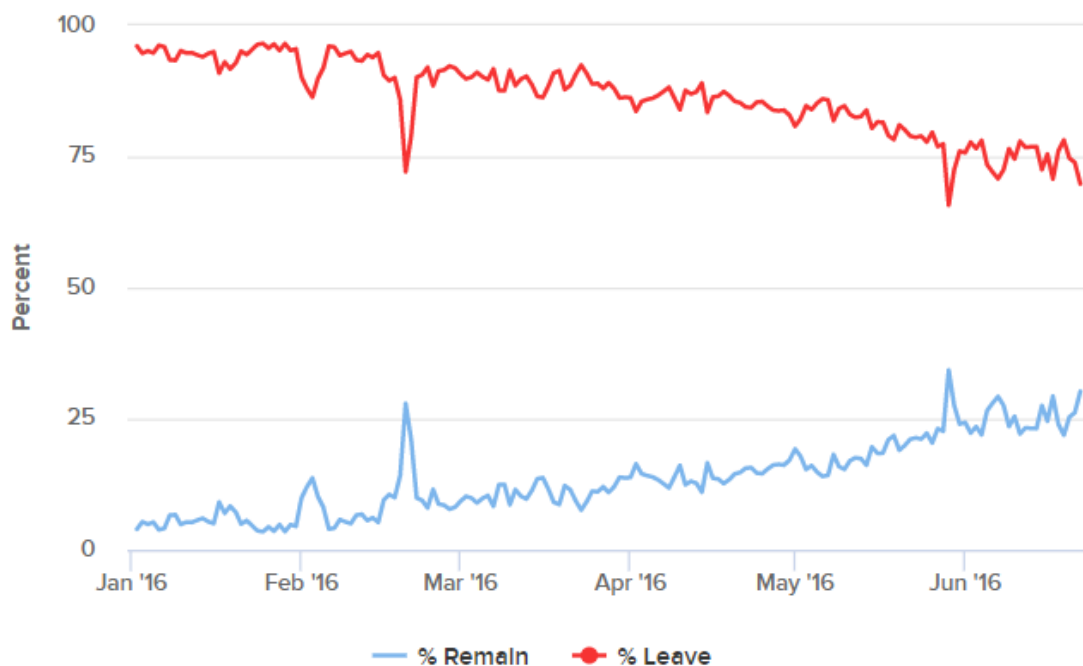
<sup>60</sup>. The national representation in London and regional offices of Edinburgh and Cardiff demonstrated their availability to take part in this interview. Only the regional office in Belfast did not accept the interview request, although several attempts were made.

## Chapter VII. Communication analysis on Social Network Sites

*“Remain supporters chose to ignore the voice of the Internet as something that has no connection with the real political world. They believed that Britain would never vote to leave the EU and discounted social media as a playground for trolls and teenagers.”*

Vyacheslav Polonski, 2016

Campaigning activities for the EU Referendum undoubtedly considered SNS as arenas of political discussion. Mullen (2016) has characterised the referendum as the first “digital referendum”. Considering the broad analysis of the activity during this period and on the topic of the referendum, there is a general consensus that ‘Leave’ campaign outperformed ‘Remain’ campaign in terms of volume<sup>61</sup> (Mullen, 2016; Polonski, 2016; Llewellyn and Cram, 2016; Usherwood and Wright, 2016). In the indicative graphic below, developed by NR Labs University of Edinburgh, for CNBC channel, one can read the larger sentiment from the very start towards ‘Leave’.



**Figure 1** Breakdown of tweets by sentiment for and against United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Source: NR Labs University of Edinburgh/CNBC

A larger focus on the existing literature on this topic aims at the activity of the ‘Leave’ campaign channels, in comparison to ‘Remain’ SNS. It is possible to assess a

<sup>61</sup> Polanski (2016) demonstrates the outperformance of Leave to Remain on a ratio of one to seven

much larger community following 'Leave' than 'Remain'. In April 2016, around 85 000 users followed Leave EU whilst more than 25 000 followed Stronger In. At the end of the campaign, Stronger In managed to almost duplicate its audience – with a little under 50 000 at the end of the campaign – but far from the approximately 95 000 followers of the Leave EU account (Usherwood and Wright, 2016).

For these two sides of the campaign, four main purposes have been identified as key for campaigning activities: 1) voter registration; 2) fundraising; 3) intelligence gathering; 4) message dissemination (Mullen, 2016). Citizens eligible to vote had to register in advance to take part in the EU Referendum, therefore this was seen as an opportunity to build a foundation of supporters on a consensus matter whilst campaigning. Campaigners also had the opportunity of searching for funding possibilities among their supporters<sup>62</sup>. Opinions, views and concerns shared by citizens on SNS served as potential hooks for campaign messaging, as well as to better understand the characteristics of voter profiles (Mullen, 2016). This last point raised several questions on its legality, particularly on its utilisation by the 'Leave' campaign<sup>63</sup>.

The messaging of pro-Remain campaign was focused on business, trade and the economy, sharing an overall negative tone in its approach (Usherwood and Wright, 2016). Whilst Leave campaigning messages demonstrated to be more emotive, focusing on a broader variety of topics (Polonski, 2016; Usherwood and Wright, 2016), as it was also approached by pro-Leave press. For Mullen (2016) the general tone of the campaign was much wider than the debate itself or focused on Europe: it was a debate among pro-establishment and anti-establishment forces.

This perspective of a zero-sum result is in line with an emotionally charged online debate. To this matter, the simplicity of the messages, capacity to relate with its audience and emotional connection would be essential to resonate with the citizens reached.

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<sup>62</sup> This is an approach recurrent in American elections and seen as opportunity to build and develop grassroots support.

<sup>63</sup> Journalist Carole Cadwalladr exposed a collaboration between the 'Leave' campaign and the agency Cambridge Analytica, which gathered a massive amount of personal data without consent of citizens reached.

## **VII.1. Social media analysis: Remain vs Leave**

National political agents play a key role in the definition of topics in the public debate during the EU Referendum campaign: these are the agents prone to influence public opinion towards a more favourable outcome. Researchers have summarised the arguments most commonly shared by both pro-Remain and pro-Leave campaigns (Hobolt and Wratil, 2016), in the different communication opportunities available – public speeches, mass media coverage and digital communication activities. This will be the starting point for this analysis of Twitter content: by having a reference of most popular arguments, one can identify the intensity of each argument, reaction from the British public sphere on digital platforms and impact on the overall digital communication. This listing of nine arguments can be categorised in the following topics: immigration, security, cost of EU membership, internal market, democratic deficit, economic benefits and stability from belonging in the European Union. The first five topics are approached mainly by the pro-Leave campaign, whilst the last two are recurrent on the pro-Remain campaign.

To contribute to a better assessment of the elements that added new elements to the communication and could be relatable to the British public sphere, this analysis considers the identification of external happenings and how these were used to fuel the argumentation and persuasion.

By looking at the digital communication activity of both David Cameron and Nigel Farage (see appendices G and H), one can assume from the start that the volume of activity from the latter has been superior to the previous – 118 and 309 tweets shared, respectively. Despite a more intense volume of communication from Nigel Farage, average engagement per tweet has been superior on the Prime Minister's Twitter account. Contrary to our expectations, Nigel Farage didn't focus exclusively his communication on national matters. In fact, 76,05% of his tweets had this focus in mind, compared to 92,37% of David Cameron. Mentions to international, European, European and national topics were addressed 74 times by Nigel Farage. Once again, the argument developed by Van Noije (2010) seems to be confirmed on digital communication: Eurosceptic audiences are more prone to consider European affairs

than pro-European audiences – even if this consideration is based on a superficial analysis of events.

When looking at the frequency of content shared, one can identify a trend in both candidates to increase the volume of communication closer to the referendum. David Cameron has a clear peak in terms of activity from 19 June to 22 June – average of 9,5 tweets per day. Nigel Farage has three main moments when the volume of his activity increased: at the beginning of the month of May, at the end of the same month and during the two weeks prior to the event. The first peak represents an event addressed on both accounts – but largely exploited by the latter: ‘Super Thursday’ elections<sup>64</sup>. The two other peaks for Nigel Farage correspond to the highest level of activity of the bus tour campaign organised by ‘Leave’ campaign.

Whilst the average engagement<sup>65</sup> per tweet for David Cameron fluctuated around 1 650 interactions per tweet, for Nigel Farage, there was an exponential growth in engagement, starting at under 1 000 interactions and having an average of 2 307,7 interactions in the month of June.

One event external to the campaign has already been identified, one which played a significant role for the smaller anti-establishment party – ‘Super Thursday’ elections<sup>66</sup>. Another common event spotted on both accounts was the visit of the United States President Barack Obama to the country. Cameron took opportunity of Obama’s visits to find a new ally for his ‘Remain’ campaign, whilst Farage tweeted seven times criticising the President and his perception of the European Union. The assassination of the Member of Parliament Jo Cox was also addressed by both. David Cameron tweeted 8 times about the happening and paused his promotion activity on the ‘Remain’ campaign for two days (17 and 18 June). Nigel Farage tweeted about the event twice.

The Prime Minister’s communication was sensitive to the earthquakes in Japan and Ecuador, reduced roaming charges (April 2016), as well as the attack in Tel Aviv

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<sup>64</sup> Elections for the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly of Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and for 124 councils in England

<sup>65</sup> Public likes, shares and replies on the content shared on SNS.

<sup>66</sup> Designation for the 2016 national elections for Scottish Parliament, National Assembly of Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and for 124 councils in England (BBC, 5 May 2016)

(June 2016). His communication strategy was defined among three main types of content: general campaigning (26 tweets), public figure support (13 tweets) and issue-based argumentation (37 tweets). Regarding the second type of content, the vast list of public support for the 'Remain' campaign includes: former national leaders from Labour and Conservative parties (e.g. Tony Blair and John Major); non-EU leaders of government (e.g. Barack Obama and Narendra Modi), actors and other public figures (e.g. Daniel Craig and David Beckham).

The leader of the pro-Leave campaign added four specific events to his communication actions: demonstrations at the Syntagma square, Athens (8 May 2019), publishing of the Migration Watch report (17 May 2016), discussions about the EU-Turkey agreement (May 2016) and Bob Geldof's conflict with fishermen<sup>67</sup>. All events depicted for extra communication purposes contributed to reinforce the disadvantages of remaining an EU member or were to take credibility of the pro-Remain campaign. Nigel Farage's communication included issue-based content (118 tweets), general campaigning (115 tweets), no trust in Prime Minister/Government (27 tweets) and criticism of the pro-Remain campaign (4 tweets). The reduced number of direct criticisms of the pro-Remain campaign was surprising and leads us to believe that it was part of the communication strategy: the focus was on criticising members of government, rather than shifting the attention to the competitive campaign during this period.

When it comes to issue-based content, Farage's communication was largely focused on immigration control. 81 tweets have been launched on this topic. The word 'borders', 'leave', 'control' and 'migration' appear more often. 'Turkey' is also in the top seven of words commonly mentioned<sup>68</sup>. The general tone of these tweets is negative towards 'EU open borders' policy, allowing a large influx of migrants to the country. The threat of a wave of Turkish immigrants arriving in the country is also explored. The second most popular argument shared is the lack of knowledge or trust

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<sup>67</sup> Bob Geldof, British singer, was one of the public figures supporting the 'Remain' campaign. On a campaign action, Bob Geldof was seen as being rude to a group of fishermen, which was exploited by the 'Leave' campaign leader to reinforce his bonds with the fishing community.

<sup>68</sup> Levy, Aslam and Bironzo (2016) highlight that Europe has become a topic of attention since 2010, through addressing immigration. Nigel Farage's party has profited from it.

in the European institutions. Mentions of a 'lack of democracy', the threat to the country or questioning the 'peace' experienced from being a member of the EU are some of the positions taken. Security implications of being a member of the EU are the third most popular argument; a focus on 'borders' is once again visible, and a different narrative is also introduced: the German intention of creating an EU army. Considering our first research on a cultural approach on Euroscepticism, this narrative feeds the view of a distinction between Great Britain and the continental European powers, particularly Germany after the Second World War.

Arguments shared by David Cameron differ in content, however the tone is rather negative in the most repeated argument: the economic risks of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Besides 'leave' and 'leaving', 'economy', 'stronger in'<sup>69</sup>, 'prices' and 'jobs' are the most popular words shared on the Prime Minister's Twitter account. David Cameron poses a defence of the *status quo*, perceived by many as unsatisfactory (see the volume of pro-Leave supporters), meanwhile Nigel Farage criticises the *status quo* and presents a message of the improvement in living conditions if British citizens support a change.

On David Cameron's Twitter account, the risk of increasing prices or job losses has been highlighted in this argument. The use of public figures (influencers of thought and debate) has been frequent and there is a reduced frequency in the use of the same words, which explains a lower repetition when compared to Nigel Farage.

Even though the volume of issue-based tweets from David Cameron were less numerous than those from Nigel Farage (37 out of 118), it is also possible to highlight the economic benefits of the European Union as the second most popular argument 'jobs', 'stronger', 'business' and 'vote' were words commonly used. Out of the scope of these tweets, Cameron introduced a narrative of Great Britain being a potential leader of the European Union, demonstrating long term benefits in remaining. The pro-Remain campaign leader was the only one who mentioned the climate during the campaign, even though it was only mentioned once.

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<sup>69</sup> Hashtag used for the remain campaign - #StrongerIn

Most frequently used words	
<u>David Cameron</u> Most popular argument: Economic risks of withdrawing from the European Union	<u>Nigel Farage</u> Most popular argument: Immigration control
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leaving – 7 times</li> <li>2. Leave – 7 times</li> <li>3. Economy – 6 times</li> <li>4. 'Stronger In' – 5 times</li> <li>5. Prices – 4 times</li> <li>6. Jobs – 3 times</li> <li>7. Clear – 3 times</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Borders – 42 times</li> <li>2. Leave – 33 times</li> <li>3. Control – 30 times</li> <li>4. Migration – 25 times</li> <li>5. Open – 22 times</li> <li>6. Million – 10 times</li> <li>7. Turkey – 9 times</li> </ol>

**Table 4** Most Frequent used words by national political agents

Understanding the complexity of messages shared via SNS is relevant to comprehend the capacity of being understood by a vast audience during a campaign period. The Flesch-Kincaid grade score provides an overview and a solid basis to compare the communication style between different channels. After analysing the full extension of textual elements shared on SNS, Nigel Farage's Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is set at 7.2 – equivalent to a seventh-grade level. Cameron's content, under the same formula, scores 8.3, proposing a slightly more complex understanding level.

The European Commission was mentioned only once during this period, by Nigel Farage. The tone was negative and criticising the institution for intervening in national decisions, whilst making a connection to the issue of immigration control. President Jean-Claude Juncker was mentioned twice by the same author, criticising a lack of coherence with the British Prime Minister. No direct mention was made by David Cameron of the institution or President Juncker.

Both actors were active in the use of Twitter for the purpose of their campaign. Whilst in the pro-Remain campaign, the strategy assumed by David Cameron was supported by his exposure as Prime Minister and his campaign allies, recognisable by a public audience, Nigel Farage took advantage of the social network to demonstrate the grassroots basis of this campaign, close to local audience. This channel was also used by the pro-Leave leader to strongly criticise of the Prime Minister. Focusing on national points of concern, such as immigration control, as well as being vocal about national events contributed to an increasing level of engagement, not followed by his opponent and Prime Minister David Cameron. Keeping track of European developments, such as



the EU-Turkey agreement, allowed 'Leave' leader to run a narrative of its extension towards an engaged audience.

Nigel Farage obtained a clear advantage after the 'Super Thursday' elections: a connection with the local electorate. Profiting from the results obtained allowed him a stronger visibility amongst an audience capable of taking a decision on the future participation of the country in the European Union. The verified tendency of a stronger participation of pro-Leave supporters on Twitter (as demonstrated previously) can be reflected in the activity of these two agents: the engagement of Nigel Farage grew exponentially, whilst David Cameron did not experience such growth.

## VII. Social media analysis: the European Commission

From the general guidelines of the European Commission's communication strategy, concern about digital communication coincided with the rise of Euroscepticism across Europe, particularly due to the economic and financial crisis of 2008. Twitter is the channel most commonly used by several layers of communication – both in the political and administrative bodies of the institution, at Brussels, national and regional levels.

Looking at five Twitter accounts for the purpose of this research: the European Commission's central Twitter account, the Twitter account of the European Commission representation in the United Kingdom and the Twitter accounts of the regional offices in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff. In total, 703 European Commission tweets have been analysed. As expected, the European Commission's central Twitter account generated the highest volume of tweets – 434 tweets – followed by the Representation in the United Kingdom – 196 tweets. Regional offices have a much lighter SNS level of activity, Edinburgh's office the most active with 43 tweets during this period.

### European Commission – Central account

The European Commission central Twitter account has over 1 million followers<sup>70</sup>, being the most followed Twitter account of the institution. The analysis of the activity of this account comprises a total of seventy-one days, the period from 15 April 2016 – the official start of the EU Referendum campaign – until the 23rd July 2016 – day of the EU Referendum, as per other accounts analysed. During this period, 434 tweets were collected and analysed (see appendix A).

Analysing the volume of communication from this account, one can read an average of 6.2 tweets per day. Per se, this approach already hints at a strong interest in using the communication channel to share a large amount of information. This is in line with the approach expressed in the communication strategy of the institution. The

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<sup>70</sup> On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2019 the figure was set at 1 227 476

clear trend in communication by both David Cameron and Nigel Farage of an increasing frequency close to the date of the Referendum was not replicated by this account. There was an average of 6.8, 6.0 and 6.5 tweets per day in April, May and June. With these figures, one can identify a more significant difference in terms of frequency in the month of May, whilst for the month of the referendum the frequency of Twitter activity is still inferior to the one in April.

Taking a look at a short sample of the tweets, three main types of content were able to be laid out: 1) Mentions to European Commission's priorities – the European Commission has established 10 top priorities, under which communication should fall; 2) institutional event – organisation and participation in institutional events are seen multiple times; 3) institutional communication – although all types of content analysed are assumed to fall under institutional communication, specific tweets, such as announcing college's weekly workplan, falling under the scope of the organisation of the institution. Institutional communication follows this pattern without significant exception. Interventions from Commissioners, mainly covering the official European Commission press conferences are regularly covered, therefore they are integrated in the category of 'European Commission's priorities', since these are associated with one of the ten priorities.

These three types of content were also influenced by external events or dates of public importance, such as Europe Day. Events – organised by the institution or upon which the institution takes part –introduce new elements to the institutional. Communication is much more extensive than on the British accounts analysed. For the second half of the month of April eight events were identified, in May ten and from the first to the twenty-second of June ten.

Events external to the institution were usually mentioned when they generate an action from the institution. For example, the earthquake in Ecuador (April 2016), also reported by David Cameron on his Twitter account, is only mentioned when the EU Civil Protection Mechanism is activated; the same can be verified with the yellow fever outbreak in Angola in the same year, as it is only mentioned when EU deploys medical experts to the field. The participation of members of the college at the G7 Summit or the signing of the Paris Agreement are also reported on this account. This shows that the central account of the European Commission is less permeable to

general international trends, rather than reporting the work performed in those areas. Two other external events are mentioned by this account and fall on the exception of the previous argument: the terrorist attack in Orlando, United States of America, on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2016, and the assassination of the British Member of Parliament Jo Cox. If one can conclude a more extensive approach from the British Prime Minister on this event, the European Commission shares a message honouring her memory, without any mention to the EU Referendum campaign.

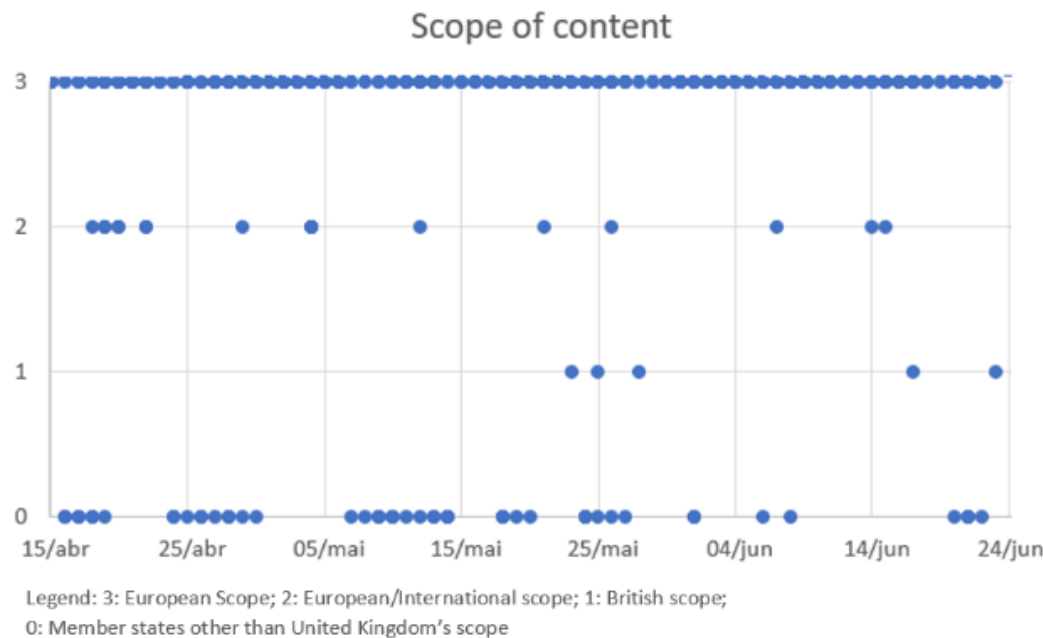
Internal institutional events identified here are based on the approval of legislative proposals which represent a significant change, the announcement of reports that might have political relevance at national level, joint-interventions with national leaders and the presentation of solutions to ongoing crises. Developments in the further integration of Member States, economic and political assessments (European Semester, May 2016, or infringement procedures against Member States, April 2016) and the evolution in negotiations to which the Commission has the mandate to carry out 13th Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) Negotiation Round) are events expected from the institution, even though they are not part of frequent communication.

The topic of migration has been repeated several times in terms of internal events, reflecting on the migration crisis particularly significant in bordering countries. In April 2016, additional EUR 110 million investment under the EU-Turkey agreement was announced and a proposal for visa-free travel to Ukraine were the most relevant in terms of scale; in May, the proposal for a more efficient Common European Asylum System; in June, the reform of the EU Blue Card Directive, the announcement of the second Connecting Europe Facility results and the approval of the European Commission's proposal on a European Border and Coast Guard. As the analysis of the accounts of Cameron and, specially, Farage demonstrate, migration played a significant role on the EU referendum campaign – this topic has also been addressed by the Commission. The proposal on visa-free travel to Ukraine announced on April 2016 seems to demonstrate an opposite view of the 'Leave' campaign leader, creating more opportunity for the circulation of people.

The Rule of Law Opinion on the situation in Poland, represents an action of the Commission against specific measures of a government with a nationalist narrative, such as the ‘Leave’ campaign.

A widely appreciated initiative launched at this time was the reduction of roaming communication charges in April 2016. This was also referred to by David Cameron, even though no mention of the institution was made. President Juncker’s visit to Greece (June 2016) and the visit of the Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern in the same month were also communicated on the European Commission’s central Twitter account.

After considering the volume of content shared, the main types of content and events that influenced extraordinary communication actions, the scope of content is analysed. Tailored national or regional content demonstrates a stronger attention of the institution towards more specific audiences. Four categories were established and values of 0 to 3 were given to each of them. Content focusing on EU-28 communication is valued at 3, European/International scope at 2, content tailored or explicitly addressing the United Kingdom at 1 and content mentioning or explicitly addressing Members-States other than the United Kingdom at 0.



**Figure 2** Geographical scope of content distributed on European Commission central SNS

In the map presented above, one can read a constant communication with an EU-wide scope. Activity addressing Member-States is also visible, even though more reduced during the first 22 days of June 2016. Five marks represent the five tweets

coming from European Commission's central account addressing the United Kingdom or British citizens in particular. These are five mentions out of 59 specific mentions to all of the European Union's Member States. Greece, France, Poland and Spain were the top most mentioned or addressed Member States, mentioned respectively ten, nine, seven and six times. Three of these mentions fall on the jobs, growth and investment priority, announcing investment agreements established in country. The fourth tweet reflects on the assassination of the Member of Parliament Jo Cox, whilst the last, shared on the day of the Referendum, congratulates the success of British soccer teams in the UEFA Euro 2016 championship.

A very clear advantage for the European Commission's communication towards British citizens is the language: the English language is used in 97% of the tweets. Communicating in a native language of a country contributes to the level of understanding of the message shared.

So far, it is possible to assess a wide range of topics being addressed by this Twitter account. The vast range of activities of the European Commission demonstrate a need to have a high volume of content being shared. By taking a look at how ten priorities are communicated – which represent 88% of total content – the aim is to assess the relevance attributed to each topic. Among these priorities, the overarching priority of Jobs, growth and investment plays a significant role in terms of volume, corresponding alone to 118 tweets. These tweets include the announcement of investment agreements in several Member States, focusing on job creation and investment for the country or region. This topic is followed by migration. This European Commission priority is the focus of attention for 50 tweets during this period, corresponding to 11.5% of the content shared. This topic was followed by the internal market (39 tweets) and humanitarian aid (32 tweets) related content. Fewer than 30 tweets were devoted to the remaining topics during this period.

There is an overlap of conversation from these institutional priorities and the topics under discussion in the EU Referendum: migration, job creation and the internal market were three topics referred to by both the leaders of 'Remain' and 'Leave' campaigns. This demonstrates a potential interest for the same audience. Looking at each topic, the aim is to understand its content, to improve what messages have been

shared on each topic and to help us reflect on their effect on the British audience, receiving content from the EU Referendum campaign.

### Jobs, Growth and Investment

Considering the volume of mentions in the first place, in June the average of tweets on this topic per day was higher, with more than 2 tweets per day (2.1 tweets per day, versus 1.5 in April and 1.6 in May). Most of these tweets share the same hashtag<sup>71</sup> - #investEU. By looking at the most commonly used words<sup>72</sup>, one can identify 'SMEs', 'project' and 'EFSI' being repeated more often, followed by 'EIPP', 'projects' and 'investments'. The words 'EFSI' and 'EIPP' assume a previous knowledge of the users reached to fully understand the communication shared. When applying Flesch-Kincaid Grade formula this assessment is confirmed: the level is set at 8.7, higher than both Nigel Farage's and David Cameron's account.

When analysing content shared on Twitter channels, Segesten and Bossetta (2016) have also introduced two essential categories for original content: information – content without a call for action – and instruction – containing a call for action. These two categories were also applied on this analysis. The large majority – 93 out of 118 tweets – share are of an informative nature. The other 25 tweets have a call for action added, being this (for SMEs) to look for investment, to provide technical assistance, to invest on EU-based projects and to learn more about specific projects.

Tweets on Jobs, growth or investment gather on average 99 interactions per tweet – close to the 98 average interactions per tweets in general on this account.

### Migration

Communication on 'migration', as one of Juncker's Commissions priorities has increased on average per month: from an average of 0.4 tweets per day in April, 0.8 in May and 0.9 in June. The communication on this topic is much more disperse, from the proposal of visa-free travel to Ukraine to sharing figures and experiences from the

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<sup>71</sup> Sing (#) used on SNS to identify a specific topic and to allow interactions among users by sharing the same sign.

<sup>72</sup> The word 'Europa' appeared 81 times and has been removed from this listing. The word was triggered by being present on the link addresses shared on the tweets.

reception of migrants in bordering countries, whilst developing on multiple actions carried out with Turkey. The most commonly used words<sup>73</sup> are ‘migrationeu’ (repeated 15 times), ‘migration’ (7 times), ‘visa’, ‘refugees’, ‘reform’ and ‘action’ (6 times, each). A direct quote from President Juncker is also shared on this topic; however, this quote has been shared in German, limiting the perception of its content to German-speaking users. The complexity of the conversation is also set on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, at 9.8 – far from the maximum of 18, representing a significantly higher figure than the average level for national campaigners and even when referring to jobs, growth and investment.

Instructive content – containing a call for action – was seen three times out of the fifty tweets shared on the topic. Users reached were invited to learn more on European Commission’s proposals to reform the Common European Asylum System, to find out more about the proposal to lift visa requirements for Turkey and to stay tuned for UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) and FIFPRO (Football Players Worldwide) kick off of the campaign to support refugees.

Tweets about ‘migration’ generated, on average, 85 interactions per tweet. This is the third-lowest engagement average on the European Commission’s priorities, having the priorities of the Internal Market and Democratic change a lower average interaction per tweet.

### Internal market

Whilst David Cameron highlighted the benefits of belonging to the EU’s internal market and how it allowed investors to contribute to the country this way, Nigel Farage shared sharp criticism on the impact on specific sectors in the national economy, including the fishing industry. This priority was mentioned 27 times: 11 times in April, 9 times in May and 7 times in June – not representing a strong frequency or level of disparity among different months.

In five separate tweets, citizens were called to act. Asking for citizens to get involved in making their workplace healthier, inviting to see the growth in the EU’s

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<sup>73</sup> As for the previous priority analysed and for the same reason, the word ‘Europa’ was repeated 42 times and was excluded.



internal economy, collecting views on how to make it easier to provide services EU-wide and learning about institutional initiatives were the main actions that citizens were invited to take. Content shared on this topic was expected to be diverse – this has been seen and the most popular words<sup>74</sup> used also show it: ‘products’ (repeated 6 times), ‘#EUHealthierPlaces’;<sup>75</sup> and ‘competition’ (4 times) and ‘#EU4Consumers’<sup>76</sup> (repeated 3 times). Terms of specific products used have complicated the conversation, such as ‘Endocrine Disruptors’, with no further explanation on the message shared. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level was set at 10.8, making this the hardest of the three topics analysed to be fully understood by citizens reached.

The average level of engagement per tweet on this priority was of 78 interactions per tweet, the lowest average interactions of all priorities addressed.

Communication on the European Commission’s priorities establishes a framework on which content can be better prepared and aligned with the political strategy of the Commission. However, the rigidity of the messages<sup>77</sup> and their complexity<sup>78</sup> may pose obstacles for a full comprehension of a large audience – especially when these messages are reaching non-native English speakers.

The European Commission has used its central Twitter account to broadly communicate on existing projects financed by the European Union and on opportunities to find investment for SMEs. It is shown as presenting opportunities for job creation, however there is no testimonial shared during this period, making the conversation limited to the volume of investment and technical aspects.

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<sup>74</sup> Word ‘Europa’ was repeated 21 times and excluded from this analysis, for the reasons previously mentioned. ‘cj73cr’, as part of a link address shared four times, was also excluded

<sup>75</sup> #EUHealthierPlaces has been the hashtag used for communicating about healthier workplace conditions

<sup>76</sup> #EU4Consumers was the hashtag used when addressing requirements that EU products had to follow before being exposed in the EU market.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. “Joint statement by @FedericaMog & Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javad Zarif europa.eu/rapid/press-re... #EUIran”, message shared on the 16 April 2019

<sup>78</sup> E.g. “Visa liberalisation criteria will not be watered down #EUTurkey. Full speech: europa.eu/!CB93uW”, message shared on the 19 April 2019

Migration was a hot topic during the EU Referendum campaign: messages shared by the 'Leave' leader were clearer and focused on central arguments. From the European Commission, the lack of coordinated messages, complexity of terms and lack of simplification in the communication assumed did not contribute to a better reach of the message. This is also due to the need of finding political solutions for an ongoing crisis at the time. Nonetheless, whilst the expression 'Refugees' was being used for solidarity campaigns, the word is mentioned only six times in fifty tweets – this comes as an example how shared-concepts are not frequently repeated thus creating room for different interpretations of messages on the topic. Recurrent mentions of the agreement with Turkey were followed by a narrative of Nigel Farage that a negotiation for Turkey's accession was ongoing – there was no clear message from the Commission stating that this was not the truth.

When it comes to the internal market, one of the biggest concerns was the implications that this posed to specific sectors of the British economy and how being a member of the European Union would limit the capacity of generating new job opportunities. If the second issue had been tackled with the overarching priority of the institution, the second was not. On a topic that generated the lowest level of interactions, the institution rather focused on general messages, from the consumer point of view.

Therefore, even if superficially it seems that all agents were addressing the same issues, the conversation taken was quite distinct and did not create large a common ground of understanding.

#### National representation and regional offices

After assessing how the central account of the European Commission addressed the topic, it is important to assess if the same results were seen in the national Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom and its regional offices. This institution's communication strategy defines an important role of both addressing the citizens by localising messages and to be a focal point of intelligence in the observance of national phenomenon.

As expected, the Representation in London presented the highest frequency of social media posts shared – 196 tweets shared. The regional office in Belfast presented the lowest level of activity – thirteen tweets only – followed by the Cardiff office, with seventeen tweets. The office in Edinburgh presented a higher volume of activity, with forty-three tweets shared, although still maintaining an average of lower than one tweet per day. The same is confirmed regarding engagement: whilst the Representation in London presented an average of 6.9 interactions per tweet, the remaining offices presented fewer than four interactions per tweet – the office in Belfast generated lower than 1 interaction per tweet. This is particularly relevant to understand how content shared by the European Commission via regional and national offices was received by different national communities (see Appendices B, C, D and E).

The specific type of communication on these accounts implied an added set of elements to be confirmed. The type of content includes not only mentions/reference to European Commission's priorities, institutional communication and institutional events, but also references to Commissioners' visits and references to the EU Referendum.

European Commission's main Twitter account in the country highlighted eight main actions specific to the country: all connected to the activity of the institution, as seen on the central account. Three of these are on the results of funding programmes in the country: 'United Kingdom as one of the top locations for European Research Council grants', largest use of EU funding by British Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) for feasibility studies and the British leadership in the latest phase of Horizon 2020 'Fast Track to Innovation' funding; these three elements alone show a positive tone of the messages shared in the country regarding the economic benefits of belonging to the European Union. The European Commission's prohibition of Hutchison's acquisition of Telefónica UK was also announced, providing an opportunity to understand the motives for this decision. The reduction in roaming communication charges in the European Union, participation in the G7 and humanitarian support in Ecuador were also announced.

The majority of tweets shared (66.84%) fell under the European Commission's priorities, being the overarching priority of 'jobs, growth and investment' the most repeated (53 times). This was followed by 'digital single market' (repeated 24 times)

and 'internal market' (14 times). Less than 10% of the content corresponds to 'migration' and 'humanitarian aid' combined. Visits of Commissioners to the country are mentioned three times, during the sixty-eight days analysed: British Commissioner Jonathan Hill is the only Commissioner referred to without any association to the EU Referendum.

When looking into the institutional communication shared on this account, one is able to see seven occasions of European myths being debunked. These communication actions are further developed in blog posts, to which a web address is provided. Even though this initiative poses as interesting during the EU Referendum campaign, it is possible to read in one of the tweets the celebration of more than twenty years of this initiative to clarify the debate on European affairs. Regulation on kettles, toasters and vacuum cleaners, EU funding to support the regeneration of Nottingham's Sneinton market, investment made on tackling cancer and EU taxing are the stories covered.

The most shared words on this account are 'european' (34 times), 'investeu' (30 times), 'efsi' (19 times) and register (17 times). The first four words are associated with the overarching priority of the European Commission, focused on demonstrating the extension of investment in the country. The last word points to the conversation about the EU Referendum: this account advocates for the registration of British citizens to be able to vote in June 2016. The tone shared on these messages is intentionally neutral, including one last tweet sharing the call for citizens to register, regardless of their vote: "Whichever way, have your say!" .

By narrowing our analysis to 'migration' and 'humanitarian aid' priorities, one can read the word 'refugees' repeated six times. With less than half of the tweets shared on this account, the word is repeated almost as much as in the central account, suggesting the application of a different wording used when addressing the topic. Content focused on topics such as 'security' or 'health' are also found on this account.

The readability score for these messages is set at 8.4 (Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level). This goes in line with the average readability results from the central account. Citizens are also invited to take an action at a low percentage – only 31 tweets out of 193. The average engagement of this account was of 6.88 interactions per tweet: this

represents a low level of interest from an extensive audience that could be reached by the institution in the country.

As aforementioned, the activity of regional offices was much more dispersed and demonstrates a lack of strategy or strategy execution from these offices. From Belfast, the largest attention was devoted to 'Internal Market', on general communication of informative nature – the overarching priority was only mentioned once. In Cardiff, 'jobs, growth and investment' are mentioned as much as actions on 'digital single market'. In these two accounts, no mention is made of the EU Referendum and one Commissioner visit is referred on each account: Irish Commissioner Phil Hogan. The average engagement of these accounts was of 1 interaction per message – this result is extremely low and demonstrates a lack of success of the account to make its messages visible.

In Edinburgh, the scenario is slightly different: first of all, there is a higher complexity of the messages shared, then the level of engagement is also higher – proposing a stronger relation created between audience reached and the account.

Institutional events (organised by the regional office or at Brussels level) represent the highest volume of content shared – 37.21% of all messages. The organisation of events by the office and the use of social media allowed creating a connection between physical events and online communication channels. The celebration of Europe Day, signature of the Paris agreement and the announcement of Scottish beaches as excellent due to their quality of water are some of the events mentioned in this account. The assassination of Jo Cox is also mentioned, this being the only account of the European Commission in the United Kingdom addressing the topic.

The visits of Commissioners Jonathan Hill and Phil Hogan were announced via this channel. The EU Referendum was also addressed on three occasions: two of them to remind citizens to register and on one occasion to let citizens learn about a debate at the Royal Society of Edinburgh on this topic. The highest percentage of content is also tailored to address the British audience (29 out of 43 tweets). Besides 'europe' and 'commission', 'Edinburgh' is the most shared word. This shows an interest of addressing local events or to connect to a local audience.

A different phenomenon can be observed at these levels of communication: there is a clear interest in addressing a British audience, however the level of localised messages depends on the activity carried out by each account. The account of the representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom maintains the structure of the Commission of being sensitive to events in which the institution has a role, ignoring national events – this poses challenges to the connection between national audiences and the institution.

The European Commission's priorities are addressed on all channels analysed, however, at different paces. Looking particularly at the references of the overarching priority of the European Commission, this has been made a priority in London, but not in the regional offices where the priority is mentioned fewer or as many times as other topics.

There are references to the EU Referendum in two of these accounts, which poses the question of a lack of joint strategy in the management: from London and Edinburgh, there are several messages shared calling citizens to register to vote, and, in the latter, there is even a promotion of a debate on the topic. Therefore, posed hypothesis 1, one is faced to conclude that there is a structural level of coordination, however it is not verifiable as a consistent level of communication. British citizens following the Twitter account of the representation would be more likely to see a call for register to vote or citizens following the account of the office in Edinburgh would learn more about the daily activities of the European Commission, than citizens following the accounts of the offices in Belfast or Cardiff.

Although understandable, a low level of interaction when compared to the other actors, for each account, the average interaction per tweet is lower than the number of EU officials working in these offices. This highlights a significant issue of activating the communication of these accounts to a larger audience and to better adapting the content to be better received by British citizens. The office in Edinburgh is only trying to create a relation between an event organised by the office and the online communication channel. These two channels were also capable of addressing topics under discussion during the EU Referendum campaign – the lack of visibility of this content due to its low level of interaction and the informative factual nature of the communication contributed to an inefficiency in taking part in the conversation.

From this content analysis of European Commission's SNS, no particular effort has been made on communicating explicitly about the EU Referendum – as an example, the tweet launched on the day of the referendum about the results of the British teams in a football championship. Some of the EU Referendum topics have been addressed, however there isn't a clear determination of its objective to reach the British public sphere – the lack of reference to British citizens or multiplication in European Commission offices in the United Kingdom.

From the central account, it is possible to see an increase in the volume of mentions of the 'Migration' priority, which can be indicative of an attention to this campaign or as a reaction to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in countries bordering Europe. From this, one can conclude that the European Commission addressed topics mentioned during the EU Referendum campaign, however these were tailored to specifically reach the British audience.

The only clue to understanding the position of the European Commission comes from the statement of the President Jean Claude Juncker on his regret for not intervening in the campaign – but was there a communication strategy in place? Was this information shared to local and regional offices? If so, how?

Whilst analysing the communication of the two campaign leaders, one also notices an exponential growth in engagement for the pro-Leave lead representative. Was this behaviour being monitored? In a campaign known for the proliferation of polarised positions on social networks (Stocking, 2018<sup>79</sup>) and the announcement of incorrect messages about the activity of the EU institutions (Cadwalladr, 2019), what has been the position of the institution in this instance? Was there any caucus for adapting the messages?

To obtain clarification on these questions raised by the content analysis, the research moves to an interview analysis of EU officials working directly on the communication of the institution.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/episode/21uflgU2yeMaBizWPp1bRj>

## Chapter VIII. Analysis of Interviews

The European Commission's available documentation – strategy, annual planning and reports – lack in providing a full picture to comprehend the approach taken in this specific communication effort – this is not surprising due to the specificity of the study. Therefore, the testimonial of EU officials working in the communication field of the institution presents a missing link in terms of the description of the strategy presented, ambitions set at each communication level, as well as challenges and restrictions faced during activity.

### Communication strategy: “Business as usual”

From the start of all interviews carried out, interviewees expressed the official position that the European Commission was not actively involved in the 2016 EU Referendum campaign. A Commission Spokesperson reinforces this statement with an official position of President Jean-Claude Juncker: *“It was a mistake not to intervene and not to interfere because we would have been the only ones to destroy the lies which were circulated around. I was wrong to be silent at an important moment”*. This perspective goes in line with the information obtained so far by the official positions assumed. Mark English, formerly at the Representation of the European Commission in the UK mentions that the communication efforts during this period followed a “business as usual” way, as in the other 27 Member States in terms of communication output.

The communication strategy was described as “very very different” from the communication plan put in place afterwards (EU Official, 2/3), which was also confirmed by the majority of interviewees. This main change has as central point the statement previously mentioned, however the explanations provided for this to happen vary.

EU official (2/3) provided a three-part argument for the lack of intervention from the Commission. First of all, the EU Referendum was national matter of public consultation of a specific Member State – “given that referendums, generally speaking, are national competences, generally speaking, as a result we don’t get involved in them”. Secondly, the European Commission received the request from the British



Prime Minister David Cameron not to interfere, which is a significant request to consider since both the Prime Minister and the institution have similar objectives – this is an argument repeated by all interviewees, as they all mention the 2019 statement from President Juncker. Thirdly, it is a political competence for the college of Commissioners to decide, therefore the scope of activity from EU officials is limited without content to support them.

The first part of the argument is not repeated by all other members interviewed – there is no reference to a national competence by representatives of regional offices. A question of legality could be placed, as to understand what are the limits to which a supranational institution could interfere in a national referendum. However, the question is not as relevant as a decision of political nature to EU officials interviewed, connecting the first part of the argument to the last. Whilst the second has been extensively repeated, the third part of the argument is repeated by Graham Blythe (Head of the regional office of the European Commission in Edinburgh), when mentioning that is not up to an “unelected official” to take a stand – EU officials at multiple levels would need the confirmation of the college of Commissioners to go against the status quo installed.

There are two new elements introduced by these interviews: 1) there is a mention of a strategic plan put into force and 2) there is a mention of a more active player within the institution.

The first element is initially introduced by an EU official (2/3), mentioning that “there was a Task Force under Jonathan Faull” responsible for the communication guidelines. This is a mention of the Task Force for Strategic Issues related to the UK Referendum. This information is later confirmed by regional office representatives, providing more details of this: “Guidance was given on what we should and on what we shouldn’t communicate” (David Hughes). It is possible to assess that there is a technical aspect prior to the political intention, as Jonathan Faull was responsible for the Task Force responsible for strategic issues related to the UK referendum, reporting directly to the President of the European Commission (European Commission, 2015)<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> The Task Force was formed in 2015 to conduct the negotiations with the British government on the renegotiation of its membership in the European Union. On the brief description of the Task Force by

Several elements point back to the guideline provided by the Task Force under political authority<sup>81</sup>, which indicates that a strategy had been put in place – even if it corresponds to a non-intervention from the Commission, it is a strategy assumed at a political level, coordinated by a technical unit in cooperation with the Spokesperson service (Commission Spokesperson) and implemented by the Spokesperson Service, DG COMM, national and regional offices.

The second element introduced mentions the activity of the British Commissioner Jonathan Hill. We had established a connection between a lack of participation in the EU Referendum by the institution, supported on a political ground. However, there is a mention of activity from the European Commissioner for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union.

Whilst the first added information focuses on the instructions provided to the administrative and representative level of the institution, the second hints to a position of a political member, which had its own digital communication channels. Adding Commissioner Jonathan Hill's Twitter account into our analysis, we are capable of observing the majority of his tweets are focused on the United Kingdom (59 out of 108), including references to the EU Referendum 34 times. This is the highest volume of references to the EU referendum during the campaign that any account of the institution observed has.

The content shared on this account is of a different nature: it is more informative about the political activity of the Commissioner and about developments of ongoing tasks. Users reached are provided with the content directly from the message on this SNS. These two elements combined significantly reduce the need to have a web addressed per tweet. When focusing on the content having the British audience as the primary target audience, words such as 'financial', 'market', 'services', 'single', 'eureferendum', 'sector' and 'jobs' are the most commonly used. There is a clear focus on advocating the economic benefits of the integration of the country in

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the European Commission, no mention is made to its competence of providing communication guidelines. This is only confirmed by these interviews.

<sup>81</sup> Mark English, previous Press Officer in the Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom reinforces the argument that Jonathan Faull's task force provided the principles of communication decided at political level.

the European Union, focused on the financial sector and job creation – arguments which fit perfectly in the pro-Remain campaign. When we filter the content by ‘mentions to the EU referendum’, the same set of words is shown, reinforcing this argument.

The average engagement of tweets with ‘EU referendum’ references is set at 18.1 interactions per tweet, closer to the general average of 18.9 interactions of overall content. Although these actions show an effort in having a say on the ongoing debate about the EU referendum – both at European level, including interviews with Politico Europe, for example, and national level, interviews with the BBC and Channel 4 – the folder of the Commissioner Jonathan Hill was rather technical, requiring a high level of knowledge from his usual audience. When evaluating the level of readability of all messages during this period, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is set at 11, representing a much higher level than all the accounts analysed (see Appendix F).

The perspective that European Commissioners could express their personal opinions, contrasting with the official position of the institution, is also reinforced by Mark English, former Press Officer at the Representation of the European Commission in the UK: “That decision [of not actively participating in the campaign] was taken centrally at political level in Brussels and was applied across the EC, including the London office. Some Commissioners did express their personal views during the campaign, as they were entitled to do”. In more detail, Mark English expresses that “A number of Commissioners responded to questions asked by media in Brussels or in their home countries or referred to referendum in speeches, on their own initiative”. In the official press releases released by the institution, six mentions were found addressing the EU Referendum<sup>82</sup>. Most of these references acknowledge the referendum as a challenge for the European Union. None of these references were seen in the digital communication of the institution.

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<sup>82</sup> Four mentions in June 2016: three by President Juncker and one by the Commissioner Jonathan Hill. Two mentions in May 2016: one mention by Commissioner Phil Hogan and one mention about the G7 meeting.

### The EU is not bananas: Euromyths

Although there is a generalised idea of the European Commission as a non-active player during the campaign – even though it has just been demonstrated that the British European Commissioner did get involved during the campaign – several interviewees referred to one action taken: “One of the things that we did do, was the kind of ‘myth busting’ thing” (EU Official 2/3). This communication campaign designated as ‘Debunking Euromyths’ was observed on the account of the Representation in the European Commission. An example of one of the myths identified and shared by more than one interviewee was on the European ban on bent bananas – a story that was shared in the British press and had a quite low factual relation to the EU’s activities.

Graham Blythe, Head of the regional office in Edinburgh, mentions: “the London office has been active for many years in that. It has been taken by offices in Paris and others. But the ones who did the earliest were in London... and here in Scotland! But because London has a bigger staff, they did Euromyths”. This project is in line with a “reactive approach rather than a pro-active approach”, referred by EU Official (2/3). Although there is evidence and purpose of this use on SNS, all interviewees were aiming at a broader sense of communication. David Hughes, Head of the regional office in Cardiff, adds that the office “had lots of questions from journalists on factual matters”, to which multiplies the definition of reaction not only to content identified, but also to requests posed. Further developing on these requests from journalists, journalists and politicians in the ‘Remain’ campaign were asking for information on how much financially each person in Wales would benefit per year. Due to a difficult estimate to be calculated between structural funds and funding from competitive programmes (such as the Horizon 2020), no figure was provided to avoid misleading the electorate.

EU official (3/3) confirms the usefulness of social media channels for the activity of debunking European myths, also using social media to identify them and to disseminate clarifications. Also stressed the blog where this information is kept, usually asking citizens to understand the full story on a third party platform.

Raising the question about social media monitoring on this campaign is of outmost importance. As mentioned, the proliferation of incorrect messages and hyper

polarised content contributed to the outcome of this campaign. By assessing the evolution of this content's dissemination, we can have a clue if the institution was capable of understanding all the factual evidence and if, even so, decided to maintain the same communication strategy.

Both European Commission spokesperson and Mark English highlight the joint effort by the institution centrally and nationally to monitor social media on relevant subjects. Commission Spokesperson stress the expansion of national media monitoring to its social media dissemination. Brexit argumentation was not specifically monitored, as the pro-Remain campaign was carrying out this task, according to Mark English. This is said by Mark English with a present acknowledgement of the limited capacity of monitoring the overall social media conversation during the campaign<sup>83</sup>.

#### Organisation in the UK

All members interviewed highlighted the specific nature of the British context when addressing EU topics: "I don't think it can be found in the same way as in other Member States. The UK had for, as long as it has been a member, a very, very strong anti-EU political grouping supported by anti-EU media" stresses EU official (2/3). This statement reinforces the first argument presented on this research: There is a specific framework of British Euroscepticism, upon which the European Commission has to communicate. Although this was recognised, it seems to be in line with a perspective of defeat of any great possibilities of overcoming this obstacle.

The logic of multi-level organisation of the European Commission's representation within Member States is not exclusive to the United Kingdom. Countries such as Spain, France or Germany have both a representation and regional offices in contact and communicating with citizens, interest groups and politicians. Whilst addressing this topic, Graham Blythe, Head of the European Commission's regional office in Edinburgh, mentioned that this office has been "the longest established regional representation of the European Commission". This added element demonstrates a concern for strong British integration from an early stage, including

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<sup>83</sup> Paid advertising on SNS or shared in closed groups has a limited reach to a target audience defined. Monitoring activities of these conversations are beyond the current standard models of listening to the publicly accessible conversation.

through regional integration, a perspective prior to the generalised concept of having regional offices in Germany – even though the country was one of the founding members of the European Economic Communities.

One may also consider that this importance is given not only due to the large picture of Euroscepticism in the country, but also due to the fragmentation of realities between Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This is something that some of our interviewees were prone to develop: “In Northern Ireland (...) you have a background of conflict and you have the only land border with the European Union; (...) In Scotland, you have a party in power whose main policy is, of course, independence from the United Kingdom (...) you don’t have either of these situations in Wales”, shared David Hughes, Head of European Commission’s regional office in Cardiff. These different frameworks upon which the Commission had to communicate implied different communication strategies.

As we were able to assess, when it comes to activity on SNS it is not possible to find a pattern in communication efforts from regional offices. However, one cannot draw the conclusion that this is due to a distinct approach in communication objectives. The reduced volume of activity and irregularity in digital communication from the offices in Belfast and Cardiff rather suggest that there is no established methodology to address this type of communication. Whilst in Edinburgh there was a higher volume of activity, an attention for having regular communication. Under the umbrella of regional differences it is provided a regional autonomy that does not consider the impact of almost no communication. As it is possible to observe, the lack of regular activity or campaign structure creates a reality where there is not a community built around these offices. Therefore, when relevant moments such as the EU Referendum campaign appear, the level of reach of content shared on these accounts is very limited – thus the low engagement verified – creating an effect of a horsetail firework, by demanding effort from the organisation to launch communication without expanding to other users. On the other hand, the communication from Nigel Farage, for example, is reminiscent of a chrysanthemum firework effect, by largely expanding its initial reach to a vast audience, before dissipating.

When considering the very relevant topics raised, specific to Northern Ireland and Scotland, we need to understand its impact in communication. Starting from the first, the communication from the office in Belfast does not make any mention of the issue solved with a common border. The same is true – at least on the message shared directly on the SNS – for the remaining accounts analysed. There seems to be a paradox here, as this has become one of the focal points of discussion during the withdrawal negotiations of the country. Highlighting the fact that in hindsight it is easier to make such assessments, an EU official (3/3) mentions that this topic could have been featured in European Commission's communication "the question of Northern Ireland (...), that hardly featured in the national campaign in the UK prior to the referendum". Besides addressing this topic, there is also a second argument of considering the communication campaign of the institution as complementary to the national communication campaign. If there is no mention from the 'Remain' campaign, the European Commission could have complemented and "we could explain what it means to leave the single market, to leave the customs union" (EU Official, 3/3), in a context that locals would more likely have understood.

The aspiration for independence in Scotland is a matter of more than minor importance for the context of the European Commission's presence in the country. This represents an internal conflict that poses challenges to the constitution of the European Commission, specially stressed during the 2014 independence referendum in the country. This is an experience prior to the EU Referendum that can be interpreted as a trial of how the European Commission's engagement was carried out and how the European Union was a topic of debate. Graham Blythe, head of European Commission's regional office in Edinburgh, stresses that from an institutional communication perspective "it is always safety first", a line that is continued in the EU Referendum in 2016. He also adds that a similar request to that made in 2016 by the British government had already been made in 2014: "Prime Minister Cameron said to President Barroso to please stay out of the independence debate". There were 3 623 344 votes counted during this referendum, of which 2 001 926 voted 'No' to the independence of the country and 1 617 989 voted 'Yes' (British Electoral Commission, 2014). These figures represent a close vote in a matter that would have an impact on the European Union, with 44.65% of voters showing their willingness to become

independent. However, Graham Blythe also adds that “no Commissioner shied away because the referendum was taking place. They were engaging, they were speaking, which was very good”, also adds that although President Barroso stressed the general line of not intervening during the referendum, he shared his view on this before the referendum. From the regional office perspective, there was also the intention to clarify that a withdrawal of Scotland from the United Kingdom was synonym to a withdrawal from the European Union, upon which there could be another process to re-join the Union, similar to other countries which are undergoing the same process.

From these statements we can understand the similarity of 1) the intention from the British government and 2) the general stand from the European Commission. However, this time we have a 1) reference to the guidelines set by the President, 2) a later intervention from himself, 3) an active communication from Commissioners (even if on another topic) and 4) an active role of the regional office in clarifying the consequences. On top of these elements, the close results should have indicated a series of lessons to be taken from here, demonstrating that, even in Scotland, integration in the European Union could be at stake when national matters are under discussion.

Graham Blythe highlighted the need to reach out not only to interest groups and interested parties, but also to organise activities for the general public. Even though it might seem out of the scope of the EU Referendum campaign, one of the events organised by this office on the celebration of Europe Day resonated in the office’s digital communication activity: creating opportunities to involve the citizens was perceived as a strategy to demonstrate closeness to the European Union. Digital communication in this instance was used to amplify the effects of this interaction. When using SNS for informative purposes, the account benefits from a tailored perspective of an already reached audience.

In Wales, the two questions, as aforementioned, were not under discussion: there is no land border with other Member State, no threat to peace in the region nor a political force in government pushing for independence<sup>84</sup>. The particularity of the

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<sup>84</sup> The political party Plaid Cymru calls for Wales independence as a sovereign state in its manifesto, however this party was not in government at the time of the campaign.



country is the impact of European funding for development: “Wales currently receives around £680 million per year in EU funding, considerably more per person than any of the devolved nations and English regions” (National Assembly for Wales, 2018), mainly in the context of Structural Funds and through the Common Agricultural Policy. This topic was raised from the start of the interview with David Hughes, Head of the regional office in Cardiff: “Wales receives the highest levels of structural funds”. However, when we look at the activity of digital communication of this office, the Jobs, growth and investment priority is only mentioned three times during the EU Referendum campaign.

On a general note on the office’s communication, David Hughes mentions an intense volume of questions on factual matters regarding EU funding, during this campaign, in particular to provide an overall figure of how much, financially, does each citizen benefit from EU funding. This request was described as an “obsession from journalists and politicians”. As mentioned before, the office was not capable of providing this information due to the nature of the funding programmes applied in the country. Nevertheless, in the 2018 National Assembly for Wales report on ‘Preparations for replacing EU funding for Wales’ an overall figure is revealed. This demonstrates how the European Commission’s communication was not aligned with the interests of the Welsh nation and not addressing the fundamental elements in a clear manner to the nation.

Each of the nations with a regional office in the United Kingdom present specific features which, in general terms, are not specifically addressed. Even considering Euroscepticism in the country as a whole, a phenomenon recognised as quite specific in this country, David Hughes mentions that advice was provided on how to tackle it, but “it was a broad approach applied to all member states, not uniquely to the United Kingdom (...), focused quite a lot communicating the facts”. There is a clear paradox in general communication guidelines provided to all offices in the country, particularly when it comes to digital communication.

To try to understand the depth of this paradox, one needs to fully understand the multi-level organisation of the digital communication of national and regional offices. So far, we have been able to explain that the Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom is constituted by the London office (the physical

seat of the Representation) and regional offices in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Graham Blythe describes this relationship as London being the “mothership” of all offices, whilst David Hughes highlights that “the Head of the Representation is the line manager and also in charge of the three regional offices”.

In terms of digital communication, the Representation follows the guidelines provided by Presidential services, being it from DG COMM or, specifically to this period, Jonathan Faull’s task force. However, to understand the distinction in terms of activity, it is important to understand more about the elements putting the communication strategy into practice.

EU Official (3/3) mentions that this position was created prior to the EU Referendum campaign – a view corroborated by David Hughes, which dates the position to two to three years prior to the campaign. This is also in line with the institutional strategy drawn for this type of communication: the creation of a position of digital leader, to attribute this competence to experts capable of addressing audiences through SNS.

David Hughes clarifies that not only representations, but also regional offices had a position of Digital Leader. However, for regional offices, this did not correspond to an extra member of staff, rather the upskilling of an existing member to be attributed a new set of tasks: “The Digital Leader from London came to Cardiff, trained us and explained the guideline to us”. Graham Blythe adds to the conversation that when operating in full capacity, the office team had a total of five elements, while other regional offices, such as the office in Munich, had a team of twelve; therefore the social media output could not be compared. Following this example, the office in Munich has a full-time member dedicated to social media activities.

The argument of limited resources enriches the analysis of the capacity of communication of the institution. The addition of new members in these offices was only applied after the EU Referendum, which was aimed at a new set of tasks rather than the initially foreseen for these offices. Graham Blythe considers: “If we had more staff, we could have a more ambitious programme”, saying that his office had already “punched above its weight”. From Cardiff, a reflection on digital communication also acknowledges the capacity of the European Commission, as many other institutions, to have a stronger presence on SNS.

When it comes to coordination among different regional offices and the representation, all members confirmed this coordinated approach, mentioning that regular meetings were held. EU official (3/3) mentions that the approach to coordination meetings was “to be very careful” on the communication actions about the campaign or domestic policies, an argument supported by the other interviewees. Technical recommendations on how to improve communication actions were referred as coming from DG COMM in Brussels. As it is at this level that the majority of the monitoring is taking place, by analysing the content, this team would be able to provide recommendations.

## CONCLUSION

The outcome of the 2016 EU Referendum posed, and continues to pose, challenges to the European project and the conception of the communication approach of the executive of the European Union. The referendum campaign focused on the British public sphere and demonstrated that the European Commission was not capable of addressing it or presenting itself as an agent comparable to national political agents on social network sites such as Twitter.

Even though the institution considered social network sites as part of its communication channels, elements observed lead us to conclude that this was not a priority for the institution. Hence, there is reflected a low efficacy of reaching British citizens during the campaign period. From the structural analysis of previous institutional organisation, the transition from a Commission based on the Spitzenkandidaten process revealed facilitated changes in its internal structure, but its effects were not especially perceived at the time of the campaign.

This final conclusion is founded on three main arguments, demonstrating the lack of continuity in the communication approach: 1) attention to national public spheres is not particularly reflected in digital communication activities; 2) messages tend to be more complex, based on policy programmes, lacking in their capacity of delivery; and 3) there is a lack of coordination of messages and use of communication tools.

The first argument revises long debates on the focus of the European integration process, oriented towards elites or towards the perception of European citizens. After the fall of Santer Commission (1999) one could expect that the answer had been answered, particularly with a political Commission assumed by President Juncker. However, this has not been particularly reflected in this case. Central communication channels of the European Commission are not exclusive to specific national audiences, however we were able to see that on the European Commission's central Twitter account, content is directed at or mentioning the British public sphere five times (out of 434): three messages on the Commission's umbrella priority of Jobs,

Growth and Investment, one message on the assassination of British Member of Parliament Jo Cox and one message – on the day of the referendum – congratulating British soccer teams. This account was not capable of directly addressing the British public sphere on matters of high importance for the country during this period, as the EU Referendum is not even mentioned. When considering issues referred to during the EU Referendum campaign, such as migration, the conversation is oriented to the resolution of the migration crisis in bordering European countries. Unclear references to Turkey and the repetition of terms already embedded in the pro-Leave campaign contribute to a lack of inter-subjectivity of shared terms.

The European Commission disposes of communication channels at a national level, through the Representation in the country or regional offices. These could be used both to address and listen to the conversation from the UK's public sphere. This has not been especially seen. When considering the volume of interactions on the Twitter account of the Representation in London (the most popular out of the four offices), the figures are set immensely apart from the communication carried out by lead campaigners David Cameron and Nigel Farage. The European Commission was not capable of establishing its position within the national digital conversation through these channels.

Part of this reason has to do with the content selected. In these four accounts, the EU Referendum is not particularly mentioned. The Representation in London and the regional office in Edinburgh call citizens for the need to register, and the office in Edinburgh even promotes a debate on the topic organised by another organisation. Regional offices in Belfast and Cardiff do not make any mention to the event and present an extremely low volume of activity.

From the strategic part, confirmed through interviews carried out, no change in the communication approach was applied, considering communication activities within a framework of: 'Business as usual'.

Saying that this has been applied in all communication channels is not true. First of all, from an overview of the press releases during this period, there were mentions of the EU Referendum from European Commissioners and the European

President that have not been considered on digital communication channels. Secondly, the press also covered opinions defended by members of the Commission on this topic, which were not amplified via social media. And thirdly, the activity on Commissioner's Hill Twitter account demonstrates a clear differentiation from the European Commission.

Commissioner Hill openly campaigned for one of the positions of the EU Referendum, even though the official position expressed by EU officials – based on the President's view – was that the institution should not campaign. Communication actions assumed by the Commissioner were seen as an isolated expression of his opinion, even though using communication channels associated with the institution, such as his Twitter account. However, this aggregation of positions and differentiated objectives of reaching a specific audience, capable of understanding European financial jargon, and reaching broad British audiences did not prove to be successful.

The diversity in the volume, type of message, and positions assumed by the executive's communication channels does not reflect a coordinated approach in terms of digital communication. When EU official (2/3) mentioned that communication was 'very, very different' from now, this is the focus of the statement: during the negotiations of United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, Michel Barnier and the President were the only two elements entitled to address the topic.

The growing relevance of pro-Leave online debate was not of particular attention to the institution, as it did not generate a change in the communication approach implemented. President Juncker relied on the perspective of the UK's national leader to determine the orientation of the institution, instead of looking for opportunities to intervene

Considering the historical context of Euroscepticism, the narrative developed by British leaders in its favour – including David Cameron – and the general public opinion on European affairs, the European Commission was not effective in communicating and missed an opportunity of addressing and listening to citizens through social networks. This opportunity was not missed by the pro-Leave campaign.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A Social media analysis – European Commission central Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope	Language		Understandability	
						Total	Av.					
Informative	383	<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	382	Jobs, growth and investment	118	10041	99	<u>EU</u>	356	EN	421	Flesch-Kincaid evaluation per topic: - Jobs, Growth and Investment: 8,7 - Migration: 9,8 - Internal Market: 10,8
				Digital single market	29	4218	145					
				Energy union and climate	28	2995	107					
				Internal market	27	3373	78	<u>EU/ International</u>	19	FR	5	
				A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	28	1470	86					
				A balanced and progressive trade policy	6	869	145					
				Justice and fundamental rights	13	9854	87	<u>UK</u>	5	DE	8	
				Migration	50	4247	85					
				A stronger global actor	29	2791	96					
				Democratic change	22	1737	83	<u>Member states other than UK</u>	54			
				Humanitarian aid	32	2742	86					
Instructive	51	<u>Institutional event</u>	15					<u>International</u>	0			
		<u>Institutional communication</u>	37									
		<u>Commissioner's visit to the UK</u>	0									
		<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	0									
		<u>Other</u>	0									

## Appendix B Social media analysis – Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016													
Twitter account						@EULondonrep, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/EULondonrep">https://twitter.com/EULondonrep</a>							
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability	
						Total	Av.						
Informative	151	<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	131	Jobs, growth and investment	53	1287	7	EU	114	EN	196	Flesch-Kincaid evaluation: - 8,4	
				Digital single market	24	1280	7						
				Energy union and climate	10	1017	7						
				Internal market	14	1095	7	EU/ International	4				
				A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	12	64	7						
				A balanced and progressive trade policy	2	5	3						
				Justice and fundamental rights	1	4	4	UK	78	FR	0		
				Migration	6	319	6						
				A stronger global actor	0	0	0						
				Democratic change	2	8	4	Member states other than UK	0				
Humanitarian aid	7	536	7										
Instructive	45	<u>Institutional event</u>	4					International	0	DE	0		
		<u>Institutional communication</u>	24										
		<u>Commissioner's visit to the UK</u>	3										
		<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	7										
		Other	27										

# **Appendix C** Social media analysis – European Commission regional office in Northern Ireland's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Twitter account						@EUOfficeNI, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/EUOfficeNI">https://twitter.com/EUOfficeNI</a>						
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability
						Total	Av.					
Informative	13	<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	10	Jobs, growth and investment	0	0	0	<u>EU</u>	8	EN	13	Not applicable due to the low number of tweets
				Digital single market	1	0	0					
				Energy union and climate	0	0	0					
				Internal market	4	1	0.25	<u>EU/ International</u>	2			
				A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	2	0	0					
				A balanced and progressive trade policy	0	0	0					
				Justice and fundamental rights	0	0	0	<u>UK</u>	3	FR	0	
				Migration	0	0	0					
				A stronger global actor	0	0	0					
				Democratic change	0	0	0	<u>Member states other than UK</u>	0			
				Humanitarian aid	3	0	0					
Instructive	0	<u>Institutional event</u>	0					<u>International</u>	0	DE	0	
		<u>Institutional communication</u>	1									
		<u>Commissioner's visit to the UK</u>	1									
		<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	0									
		<u>Other</u>	1									

# Appendix D Social media analysis - European Commission regional office in Scotland's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Twitter account						@EUCommScotland, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/EUCommScotland">https://twitter.com/EUCommScotland</a>						
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability
						Total	Av.					
Informative	36	<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	15	Jobs, growth and investment	4	34	8.5	<u>EU</u>	14	EN	43	Not applicable due to the low number of tweets
				Digital single market	1	0	0					
				Energy union and climate	4	15	3.75					
				Internal market	3	0	0	<u>EU/ International</u>	0			
				A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	0	0	0					
				A balanced and progressive trade policy	0	0	0					
				Justice and fundamental rights	0	0	0	<u>UK</u>	29	FR	0	
				Migration	1	1	1					
				A stronger global actor	1	0	0					
				Democratic change	1	0	0	<u>Member states other than UK</u>	0			
				Humanitarian aid	1	0	0					
Instructive	7	<u>Institutional event</u>	16					<u>International</u>	0	DE	0	
		<u>Institutional communication</u>	1									
		<u>Commissioner's visit to the UK</u>	4									
		<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	0									
		<u>Other</u>	7									



# **Appendix E** Social media analysis - European Commission regional office in Wales' Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Twitter account						@EUCommWales, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/EUCommWales">https://twitter.com/EUCommWales</a>						
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability
						Total	Av.					
Informative	7	<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	13	Jobs, growth and investment	3	2	0.67	EU	12	EN	17	Not applicable due to the low number of tweets
				Digital single market	3	2	0.67					
				Energy union and climate	0	0	0					
				Internal market	2	1	0.5	EU/ International	0			
				A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	2	1	0.5					
				A balanced and progressive trade policy	1	0	0					
				Justice and fundamental rights	0	0	0	UK	5	FR	0	
				Migration	0	0	0					
				A stronger global actor	0	0	0					
				Democratic change	2	0	0	Member states other than UK	0			
Humanitarian aid	0	0	0									
Instructive	10	<u>Institutional event</u>	1					International	0	DE	0	
		<u>Institutional communication</u>	2									
		<u>Commissioner's visit to the UK</u>	1									
		<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	0									
		Other	0									

## Appendix F Social media analysis - Commissioner Jonathan Hill's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Twitter account				@JHillEU, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/JHillEU">https://twitter.com/JHillEU</a>								
Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability		
				Total	Av.							
<u>European Commission's priorities</u>	71	Jobs, growth and investment	26	417	16.04	<u>EU</u>	51	EN	110	Flesch-Kincaid evaluation: 11		
		Digital single market	1	7	7							
		Energy union and climate	0	0	0							
		Internal market	28	520	18.57	<u>EU/ International</u>	0					
		A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union	25	427	17.08							
		A balanced and progressive trade policy	0	0	0							
		Justice and fundamental rights	0	0	0	<u>UK</u>	55	FR	0			
		Migration	0	0	0							
		A stronger global actor	0	0	0							
		Democratic change	0	0	0	<u>UK / EU</u>	4				DE	0
Humanitarian aid	0	0	0									
<u>Institutionalevent</u>	0					<u>Member states other than UK</u>	0					
<u>Institutional communication</u>	5											
<u>EU Referendum References</u>	34											
<u>Debunking 'Euromyths'</u>	0					<u>International</u>	0					
<u>Other</u>	0											

## Appendix G Social media analysis - David Cameron's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016														
Twitter account						@David_Cameron, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/David_Cameron">https://twitter.com/David_Cameron</a>								
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical		Language		Understandability		
						Total	Av.	Scope						
<u>Campaigning – EU Referendum</u>	85	<u>Issue-based</u>	37	Immigration control	1	997	997	<u>EU</u>	0	EN	118	Flesch-Kincaid evaluation: 8,3		
				Cost of EU Membership	0	0	0							
				Security Implications	2	1488	744							
<u>Campaigning – ‘Super Thursday’</u>	5			Lack of knowledge and trust	0	0	0	<u>EU/ International</u>	0	FR	0			
				Exposure to a single market	0	0	0							
				Risk of extending communitarian areas	0	0	0							
International events	3			Lack of trust in the EU success	0	0	0	<u>UK</u>	109	FR	0			
				Lack of information	0	0	0							
				Economic risk of Brexit	17	22033	1296.1							
				Economic stability in the EU	2	2294	1147	<u>UK / EU</u>	2	<u>UK/ International</u>	3		DE	0
				Economic benefits from the EU	14	15211	1086.5							
Domestic events	25			<u>General Campaigning</u>	26									
		<u>Public Figure support</u>	13											
Other	0	<u>No trust in Prime Minister or Government</u>	0					<u>Member states other than UK</u>	0					
		<u>Critics to opposition</u>	9					<u>International</u>	4					
		<u>Call for voter registration</u>	5											

## Appendix H Social media analysis - Nigel Farage's Twitter account

Analysis of social networks 15 April to 23 June 2016												
Twitter account						@Nigel_Farage, available in <a href="https://twitter.com/Nigel_Farage">https://twitter.com/Nigel_Farage</a>						
Action Type		Content type				Interactions		Geographical Scope		Language		Understandability
						Total	Av.					
<u>Campaigning – EU Referendum</u>	249	<u>Issue-based</u>	118	Immigration control	81	126380	1560.2	<u>EU</u>	18	EN	309	Flesch-Kincaid evaluation: 7,2
				Cost of EU Membership	7	11627	1661					
				Security Implications	12	11156	929.67					
				<u>Campaigning – ‘Super Thursday’</u>	28	Lack of knowledge and trust	15	23325	1555	<u>EU/ International</u>	5	
Exposure to a single market	9					15001	1666.8					
Risk of extending communitarian areas	8					12353	1544.1	<u>UK</u>	235			
Lack of trust in the EU success	2					1825	912.5					
<u>International events</u>	1			Lack of information	1	574	574			<u>UK / EU</u>	50	
				Economic risk of Brexit	0	0	0					
				Economic stability in the EU	0	0	0	<u>UK/ International</u>	1			
				Economic benefits from the EU	0	0	0					
<u>Domestic events</u>	15			<u>General Campaining</u>	115					<u>Member states other than UK</u>	0	
		<u>Public Figure support</u>	0									
<u>Other</u>	16	<u>No trust in Prime Minister or Government</u>	27					<u>International</u>	0			
		<u>Critics to opposition</u>	4									
		<u>Call for voter registration</u>	0									