THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Bridging Democratic Gaps or Building Political Brands? Perceptions of Representation from the Participation of MEPs in Social Media

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

in the University of Hull

by

Ioannis Zisis, BSc, BA, MPhil.

June 2019

Acknowledgements

I dedicate my doctoral thesis to three amazing ladies. First and foremost, my gratitude and admiration go to my rock, my beloved wife, Angeliki. She stood by me during hard times, sacrificing, persevering, supporting under uncertain conditions. I am indebted to her, and I wish for better days ahead so we can savour the fruits of our hard labour.

Unfortunately, the other two ladies will not be able to share the joy. However, I am sure they would be ecstatically proud of the completion of my research journey. My mother Fotini, twenty-two years after I graduated in Glasgow, won't be able to stand next to me due to her weak health. Yet, her sweet voice is 'singing' in my ears and carrying her words in my heart is what made me find the strength to overcome the hardships. My mother-in-law Sofia left us too early, and although I cannot keep my promise to show her around Yorkshire, I know she will be smiling from above.

My gratitude extends of course to my family (dear father Stratos, sister Maro and husband Stefanos with my sweet niece Mirela) and my wife's family (father-in-law Yiannis, brother-in-law Panos, sister-in-law Thalia and husband Michalis with my sweet niece Anastasia). They have always been there to show their affection, run our errands and provide support in various multifaceted ways.

These acknowledgements would have no meaning without making particular reference to my supervisors Professor Dianne Dean and Dr Elizabeth Monaghan. They combined forces and co-supervised me from different academic Departments overcoming conceptual differences and offered me guidance and feedback, which was essential for the completion of the thesis. They also facilitated my training as a Researcher via conferences, seminars and publication opportunities and have acted effortlessly as my Referees whenever needed. I aspire to work with them again in the production of future research output. I would also like to thank Professor Rudi Wurzel and Dr Xiudian Di from the Department of Politics who acted as internal examiners/reviewers and Professor Darren Lilleker (University of Bournemouth) who served as my external examiner during the viva. Their feedback on my thesis has been invaluable.

For the unique opportunity to gain teaching experience, I wish to thank Dr Haseeb Shabir, Dr David Harness and Dr Peter Andrews from Hull University Business School as well as Chris Hooper from OnCampus Hull. They acted as my Line Managers, giving me teaching, marking and supervising opportunities, which allowed me to become Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Finally, I feel the need to thank a group of close friends. I start with Thanassis Spetsarias, Panos Chamakiotis, Dimitris Ampeliotis, Simos Fyrigos, Giorgos Kavaliotis, Spiros Ntioudis and Stelios Dravopoulos who kept frequent contact, offered their support regardless of the distance and always had time for me like true brothers. Special thanks to my childhood friend Andreas Daskalopoulos for being there for me during hard times, extending beyond his medical profession; I am so proud to be the godfather of his son. I cannot leave out Cameron Brewer, my faraway brother in the USA, together since Glasgow '97, sharing memories and plans for future meetings. Finally, I need to thank some new good friends who have been supporting both my wife and me in various ways. Maria Kalikourdi and Giorgos Bozas in Cottingham, Yiannis Kouris and Georgia Kotsala in Manchester, Evangelos Tzolos and Fouli Nasiou in Edinburgh, opened their houses and their families, extending their friendship and hospitality.

I will sum up with a piece of advice for aspiring mature researchers. Starting this challenge in my 40s was bound to be full of surprises, sacrifices, unexpected developments and unforeseen obstacles. But then again… our life is nothing but a collection of these. So, whatever happens during your research, keep your chin up, thank God, push forward and remain loyal to your dreams and aspirations because success requires tons of effort and sacrifice.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree. It is based on research that was undertaken by me at the Faculty of Business, Law and Politics, University of Hull during the period October 2014 - June 2019.

Ioannis Zisis

30 June 2019

Abstract

This thesis provides a study of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from Ireland, Greece and Cyprus and their use of Social Media Platforms (SMPs). Specifically, the thesis explores MEPs' motivations for online engagement and the strategies they apply through their social media accounts. The MEPs face a growing demand for approachability and responsiveness within an expanding framework of disconnection and Euroscepticism. The objective is to determine whether they engage online to embrace citizens' inclusion and the bridging of the democratic gaps which have been exacerbated by the recent crises or whether they focus more on exploiting the promotional advantages of SMPs to enhance their political brand.

Central to the thesis purpose is to collect and interpret the perceptions of the MEPs about the functions of accountability, policy discussion and branding. The collection and analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with the MEPs and the qualitative analysis of content from their social media accounts revealed a series of accountability, policy discussion and branding motivations and strategies. These in combination with the post-crisis social media landscape, determine the types, volume and quality of the interactions that MEPs from crisis-inflicted states pursue online during routine (non-campaigning) timeframes.

The contribution of the thesis is that it approaches a contemporary phenomenon from an overlooked angle, i.e. how European representatives perceive and prioritise the parameters of online interaction and how this affects the engagement with constituents. Approaching the online activities of the MEPs from a non-traditional theory of representation becomes the key to accommodate their branding incentives and understand and acknowledge their particularities as supranational representatives. This also contributes to outlining an area of theoretical interest where the profiling of representational brands and the use of descriptive features find their place within a participatory framework which surpasses the sanction/reward scheme of the electoral mandate.

Keywords: social media, MEPs, accountability, policy discussion, branding

List of Tables & Figures

Tables

Table 5 Tweet Analysis - Accountability Categories Appendix VI

Table 6 Tweet Analysis - Policy Discussion Categories Appendix VI

Table 7 Tweet Analysis - Branding Categories Appendix VI

Table 8.3.1a Sample of tweets and Theme allocation Page 226

Table 8.3.1b Allocation of tweets per MEP Page 226

Table 8.5a Allocation of MEPs in orientation groups Page 242

Table 8.5c MEP orientations and interactional tendencies Page 244

Table 8.5d Prevailing brands among the researched MEPs Page 245

Table 8.5e Combination of brands and MEP orientations Page 246

Figures

Figure 8.5b interactional modes by orientation Page 243

List of Abbreviations

AC – Accountability

BR – Branding

ECB – European Central Bank

ECI – European Citizen Initiative

EP – European Parliament

EU – European Union

IMF – International Monetary Fund

MEP – Member of the European Parliament

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

PD – Policy Discussion

SMP – Social Media Platform

Contents

Declaration 2

Abstract 3

List of Tables & Figures 4

List of Abbreviations 5

Contents 6

CHAPTER 1 - CRISES, CITIZEN DISENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

1.1 Introduction 10

1.2 Democratic deficits, citizen disconnection and MEPs 12

1.3 Political communication during crisis 18

1.4 SMPs and democratic re-connection 21

1.4.1 The early years 21

1.4.2 Social media as a means of political interaction 25

1.5 Rationale, contribution and structure of study 29

1.5.1 Rationale & Contribution 29

1.5.2 Structure of study 32

1.6 Conclusion 34

CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction 35

2.2 Functions of representation 35

2.2.1 Civic participation 35

2.2.2 Accountability & Policy Discussion 38

2.3 Visions of representation 41

2.3.1 Traditional typologies 41

2.3.2 The alternative approach 44

2.3.3 MEPs and the Selection Model 47

2.4 Branding incentives for MEPs 50

2.5 Questioning online participation 52

2.5.1 The social media landscape under crisis 52

2.5.2 MEPs' perception of online accountability 54
2.5.3 MEPs' perception of online policy discussion 55
2.5.4 Descriptive features and online branding 57
2.6 Conclusion 61

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Introduction 62
3.2 An interpretive approach to online behaviour 62
3.2.1 An inductive reasoning for online participation 63
3.2.2 Qualitative techniques to reveal MEPs' perceptions 67
3.2.3 Supporting the analysis with social media content 73
3.3 Data collection and analysis 76
3.3.1 Sampling, timeframes and filtering 76
3.3.2 Organising and conducting interviews 80
3.3.3 Collection and analysis of tweets 84
3.4 Research ethics and integrity 87
3.5 Conclusion 90

CHAPTER 4 - THE LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

4.1 Introduction 91
4.2 External parameters 91
4.2.1 Crisis and platform discourse 92
4.2.2 Euroscepticism, fragmentation and disengagement 95
4.2.3 Electoral systems 99
4.2.4 EP processes and MEP resources 100
4.3 Internal parameters 103
4.3.1 Synthesis, quality and features of the audience 104
4.3.2 Sentiment expression 109
4.3.3 Noise & trolling 111
4.3.4 Platform design 115
4.3.5 Flaws and dangers 119
4.4 Advantages of online political communication 120
4.4.1 Benefits for accountability 121

4.4.2 Benefits for policy discussion 124
4.4.3 Benefits for brand promotion 127
4.5 Conclusion 129

CHAPTER 5 - PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

5.1 Introduction 130
5.2 Accountability motivations 130
5.2.1 Transparency and role clarification 131
5.2.2 Legitimation and duty 133
5.2.3 Consistency 135
5.2.4 Self-assessment 137
5.3 Accountability strategies 139
5.3.1 Bi-directional communication 140
5.3.2 Work repositories 143
5.3.3 Committing online 145
5.3.4 Complementarity 149
5.4 Conclusion 151

CHAPTER 6 - PERCEPTIONS OF POLICY DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction 152
6.2 Policy discussion motivations 153
6.2.1 Views justification 153
6.2.2 Monitoring and influencing public opinion 156
6.2.3 Policy co-design 160
6.2.4 Extending discussion beyond the constituency 164
6.3 Policy discussion strategies 167
6.3.1 Topic prioritisation 168
6.3.2 Redirecting discussions to other domains 172
6.3.3 Proposal collection 175
6.4 Conclusion 180

CHAPTER 7 – BRANDING REPRESENTATION VS REPRESENTING THE BRAND

7.1 Introduction 181

7.2 Branding motivations 182
7.2.1 Loyalty and electoral rewards 182
7.2.2 Expanding the supporter base 185
7.2.3 Promotional advantages 189
7.3 Strategic Decisions 191
7.3.1 The party message 191
7.3.2 Campaigning behaviour 194
7.3.3 Virtual and physical presence 197
7.3.4 The 'industrial' use of SMPs 200
7.3.5 Descriptive features 205
7.4 The prevailing brands 209
7.4.1 Educating as European Experts 209
7.4.2 Sharing knowledge as One of Us 213
7.5 Conclusion 218

CHAPTER 8 – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction 220
8.2 Deconstructing the social media landscape 220
8.3 Associations and limitations 225
8.3.1 Conflicts and revelations from the analysis of data 225
8.3.2 Overcoming limitations with future research 230
8.4 Linking accountability, policy discussion and branding 232
8.5 Motivational categories, modes of online behaviour and MEP classifications 242
8.6 Policy recommendation: An institutional platform for political participation 248
8.7 Concluding remarks: A framework for e-participation 255

Bibliography 259

APPENDICES

Appendix I 274
Appendix II 275
Appendix III 276
Appendix IV 277
Appendix V 278
Appendix VI 279

CHAPTER 1 - CRISES, CITIZEN DISENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

1.1 Introduction

The proliferation of Social Media in everyday life as communicational and informational means has created a new field of involvement for all politicians. The number of social media profiles owned by politicians steadily increases in the two major Social Media Platforms (SMPs), Facebook and Twitter and among the 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) during the 2014-2019 term only 11% were not owning or using SMPs. [1] This social trend sets a motion that affects representatives as well as constituents within a cycle of synchronous communication. When social media were first introduced, the most optimistic scholars (Dahlberg, 2001; Coleman, 2004) claimed that the capacities of both the politicians and the constituents to interact would be genuinely enhanced providing a series of benefits like more informative and justified decision making, greater transparency, more collective policy formation, increased citizen involvement etc. In the era of spaceless and timeless online communication, the MEPs' ability to inform, interact, collect and synthesise public views for the benefit of policy-making, should have been considerably enhanced. Instead, what is mostly discussed online and offline about the SMPs are the case of fake news, the distortion of information, the fragmentation of the public sphere, the malicious behaviour of online 'trolls' and the excessive 'noise' that cloaks every well-intended effort to maintain a productive engagement. The associated accusations affect almost everyone from persons to institutions and even the circumstances which shape the online scenery.

The EU is undergoing a period of fluctuation and turmoil, which increases the uncertainty among the citizens. Internally, the different pace in which several states integrate has been exacerbated by the Eurozone crisis, which demanded painful austerity reforms for the weaker and solidarity funding for the stronger member states. Externally, the international instability in adjacent regions and the humanitarian aftermath of regional conflicts put pressure on the borders of the EU (e.g. refugee crisis).

[1] See relevant statistics in www.euvisions.eu/mep-on-twitter-european-elections-parliament-2019 and www.epdigitaltrends.eu/assets/ep-digital-trends-survey_full_results.pdf

After the wave of integration savoured in recent decades, the EU faced the threat of disintegration, either voluntary (e.g. the UK) or imposed by specific circumstances (e.g. Greece). In this fluid environment, the EU has often been accused of being too late, too fragmented or too unwilling to offer solutions[2]. The citizens of the EU have historically been somewhat sceptical towards the mechanisms of EU governance, as demonstrated by low levels of participation in the European Elections. This impression becomes even worse when it comes to the citizens' degree of involvement and their informational capacities about European policies, which are designed to affect their lives. For many years now, the deficits in the relationship between the citizens and the EU (communicational, institutional, democratic, etc.) have been put forward as the argument or the excuse for the disassociation of people from the decision-making centres of the EU (Hix, 2008; Cini & Borragan, 2009).

The MEPs as designated and democratically elected representatives have the responsibility to act as links between these centres and the national audiences. The thesis questions the use of SMPs as a medium that brings citizens closer to politics and justifies the role of MEPs as representatives. It further investigates if the MEPs are mostly interested in exploring the qualities of SMPs for their personal benefit by improving their brand as political entities. As a result, the thesis puts the MEPs and their perception of online participation in the epicentre of the search for meaningful answers, by setting and answering questions that link the core functions of accountability and policy discussion with political branding. By focusing on the role of MEPs as representatives and by applying the principles of Mansbridge's (2009) Selection Model in a scenery of crisis, the thesis answers questions about the MEPs' inner motivations and prevailing strategies during their engagement in routine (non-campaigning) online behaviour. This way, the thesis reveals the overall view of MEPs about the value and the potential of SMPs as democratic tools.

[2] See www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44249.html#_Toc531612465

1.2 Democratic deficits, citizen disconnection and MEPs

As Gauthier (1977) states, the contractual establishment of political society is a model of interpretation for all human relationships. Social agreements imply social arrangements that people are willing to tolerate for the sake of coexisting. In politics, democratic relations are based upon a social consensus, which is renewed via elections (Gauthier, 1977:135). Meanwhile, the citizens protest that they are excluded from the formation of policies that affect their life (Breindl, 2010:44). With the traditional modes of participation, leaving unfulfilled expectations, political engagement becomes less popular, leading the public to an increasing apathy, which is expressed with political indifference and abstention from the democratic procedures (Bale, 2005:150-153). For a long time now, all over the world, the political parties, as leading democratic organisations, are accused of failing to establish a secure connection between the citizens and politics. Being mostly interested in the accumulation of political power to ensure their sustainability, the parties may have contributed to the strengthening of democratic deficits (Bentivegna, 2006:332). The scheduled 'visit' to the ballot box is not on its own adequate to prevent people from feeling disconnected from politics. Achieving the joint formulation of policies in the political agenda transparently and constructively and ensuring the accessibility of excluded social groups (disabled, unemployed, older people etc.), are reasonable requests towards the greater integration of the citizens into political life (Glencross, 2009). An alternative way forward to overcome the contemporary democratic gaps is for the governments to introduce democratic innovations that will re-activate citizens outside the traditional partisan control; changes towards an open renewable political agenda, able to cover a pluralistic range of social needs without physical or social exclusions (Lyrintzis, 2011:20-22; Malkoutzis, 2011:3).

In the case of the EU, Katz (2000) argues that the concept of European integration started as a device of the European elites, which initially relied upon the 'tolerant consensus' of national governments having particularly technocratic characteristics. This consensus was in line with the historical developments which imposed EU integration, and not the result of the peoples' desire to implement it. To put it simply, the integration would have taken place even without asking the views of the EU citizens or their elected

representatives. Proof of this is that the most representative body which is the European Parliament (EP), has never had the power to balance the arbitrariness of the Commission and the Council (Katz, 2000: 3-4; Lavdas, 2002:140; Majone, 2006:7). As Katz points out, the power in the EU is centred around bodies like the Council of Ministers which are not directly elected by the EU citizens and therefore are not accountable to them. Indeed, the Council of Ministers meets behind closed doors, and the procedures to reach specific decisions remain far from the knowledge of the citizens, fuelling the democratic disconnection (Katz, 2000:6&8; Leontidou et al., 2008:171). The Commission is an executive body the members of which are appointed by the governments, not getting elected by the citizens. Its aim is not to represent the peoples themselves but to achieve tangible, measurable results for the EU. By taking initiatives and decisions that primarily concern the technocratic elites, it operates through complex processes that the ordinary citizens rarely comprehend. Another example of a European institution is the European Central Bank, which sets out the monetary policy through meetings and consultations without any transparent involvement of the EP. Consequently, decisions and related policies that affect the citizens' lives are produced with non-democratic practices, by institutions which consider themselves to be democratic by-default (Leontidou et al., 2008:171-172; Majone, 2006:8).

Historically, the EU Treaties[3] addressed in greater or lesser extent the democratisation of the EU structure. The Maastricht Treaty (signed 1992) first sought to mitigate the democratic deficits by granting powers to the EP. The treaty extended the institution of 'co-operation' between the EP and the Council, and by setting the principle of 'co-decision' for joint decision-making, gave to the EP an elevated status. The EP was also given the power to approve the composition of the Commission (Leontidou et al., 2008:175; Majone, 2006:6; Hix, 2008:34). The Treaty of Amsterdam (signed 1997) gave the EP the right to reject the President of the Commission and extended the 'co-decision' principle. At the same time, it secured the rightful access of the citizens to many categories of EU documents. However, the overall complexity of the legislative and decision-making process as set out in the treaty has been rather dissuasive for the integration of the citizens and the reduction of the democratic gaps (Leontidou et al.,

[3] For more information on the Treaties visit https://europa.eu/european-union/law/treaties_en

2008:175). The Treaty of Nice (signed 2001) is considered not to have contributed much to democratisation as the various national interests prevented the promotion of unifying initiatives. The rationale was to focus on the political administration of the integration process rather than on the vision of a democratic European polity. Functional compromises and the priority of achieving greater policy effectiveness for the exercise of EU jurisdiction prevailed against the need for a unifying legitimacy of the European entity (ibid: 176; Hix, 2008:38). The Constitutional Treaty (signed 2009) and the form it took in Lisbon have raised the issue of transparency in a clear way (public Council meetings), facilitating the participation of the citizens by allowing access to official documents. Provisions for consultation with civil society (participatory democracy) and the opening of the decision-making process by allowing legislative proposals coming through the European Citizen Initiative (ECI) after collecting one million citizen signatures (Monaghan, 2012), as well as the capacity of the national parliaments to evaluate the Commission's proposals (right of a yellow card) are considered reinforcing for the democratisation of the institutions (Leontidou et al., 2008: 133-133&176). The Charter of Fundamental Rights is also a step towards a more social Europe of the peoples, while the increased use of the 'co-decision' procedure ensures the EP's equal position with the Council and strengthens its legislative and budgetary powers (ibid:137).

The EP, due to the direct election of its members by the citizens and having gradually upgraded its role as a legislature with a 'co-decision' right, is considered the EU's most democratic institution. However, increasing its powers and legitimising it is not enough to say that the EP expresses the collective will of the EU citizens adequately and representatively, to the point that all claims for a democratic deficit are negated (Papadopoulos, 2008:2-3). Katz locates the democratic deficit in the EP's inability to make other institutions accountable for their decisions, as happens with national governments and parliaments in the member states (Katz, 2000:4). Strengthening accountability mechanisms becomes a difficult task when there is no public mandate for the EP to take proper action and citizens' knowledge of its role remains minimal and vague (Leontidou et al., 2008:173). The absence of autonomous European parties with independent policies and strategies within the EP accentuates the problem. The voters face the European elections as second-order to national elections since the parties that are competing are the national parties and not the corresponding European political

groups (Hix, 2008:70&80). The electoral campaigns refer mostly to domestic issues and not to proposals for the future of the EU while the candidates within the party lists are often persons of a questionable political magnitude not chosen from a pan-European range of candidates. Finally, the character that opposition parties give to these elections is mostly that of a protest vote against exercised national policies (Leontidou et al., 2008:172; Follesdal & Hix, 2006:535-536&552). The deficit regarding the EP is strengthening because the MEPs have not been integrated into citizens' consciousness as their genuine representatives (Cini & Borragan, 2009; Bale, 2005). The EP has failed to assume the role of the respective national parliaments as a mechanism of representative democracy which connects the citizens with the executive bodies promoting their interests. It remains a distant and untapped body that strives to strengthen its presence (Leontidou et al., 2008:173; Majone, 2006:7). Meanwhile, the MEPs face a growing demand for responsiveness, as a point of reference for essential policy topics like immigration, trade and security which are debated and legislated in the EP (Booth & Howarth, 2014).

In contrast to the previous argument, there is a view supporting that the democratic deficit is a myth deriving from Eurosceptic circles. This deficit is not justified as much as in the past because the legislative powers of the EP (which directly represents EU citizens) have enlarged, and (after Lisbon) the decisions are made jointly with the Council (which represents the elected governments). According to the Treaty of Lisbon, representative and participatory democracy is the foundation of the EU. The citizens are directly represented by the elected MEPs, and indirectly through the civil society and other associations, which submit proposals and invite the Commission to evaluate them. Furthermore, the annexation of the protocol on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality leaves a clear margin for review of all draft laws (Mousis, 2008:ch9.5; Leontidou et al., 2008:177-178; Follesdal & Hix, 2006:539). Based on this view, it is argued that pursuing the extreme democratisation of the EU is a misconception that will jeopardise its flexible operation and effectiveness (Follesdal & Hix, 2006:541). The primary example in this argument is the holding of referendums on the ratification of the European Treaties. It is usually the negotiating governments that ratify the Treaties. However, in the case of confirming via referendums, due to the complexity of the Treaties, they are not clearly understood by the average citizen, however informed

he/she may be. According to this argument, it is absurd to ask people to approve something they do not fully understand. Also, the yes-no question posed is demagogic because it leaves room for a protest-vote which reflects the apparent disapproval of the EU weaknesses. The citizens are often the victims of extreme propaganda that directs them to general condemnations. Besides, it is not entirely democratic some EU members to use referendums for the ratification of the Treaties and some others to follow the 'usual' route of the national parliaments (Mousis, 2008:ch9.5).

Since the Maastricht Treaty, an essential part of European public opinion has been questioning the right of the European institutions to take and implement decisions which affect citizens' lives without their approval, alienating them from the European institutions (Mousis, 2008:ch9.5; Papazoglou, 2010:4). The alienation was practically verified with the various negative referendums, e.g. France, Denmark, the Netherlands and also through citizens' indifference manifested by consistently high abstention during the European elections (Majone, 2006:6). These indications rooted within the EU the argument of the democratic disengagement of the citizens and the belief that only a significant democratic reform could restore the support and trust of the citizens (Papazoglou, 2010:4). This is why arrangements to enhance the transparency in decision-making (accountability), the democratisation of the structures of the European institutions and the facilitation of citizen contributions in policymaking (policy discussion) should be at the forefront of institutional efforts (Mousis, 2008:ch9.5). The intergovernmental nature of the central EU institutions (Council and Commission) requires the indirect representation of citizens' preferences through the national parliaments and the governments. To maintain political independence, the approaches to policy-making are highly technocratic susceptible to lobbying instead of using openly politicised processes (deliberation).

As a result, it is the governments and the elites that shape the final strategies. This creates a lack of social legitimacy since the various issues in the agenda are not chosen through social dialogue and public scrutiny or at least with adequate citizen involvement (Papazoglou, 2010:5). Consequently, the EU deficit has two main dimensions: one is purely institutional and refers to the legitimacy and the accountability of EU institutions towards the citizens and the second is more substantive and refers to what the EU

represents; whether there is common ground for reference, a collective identity for all Europeans and the capacity of the citizens to participate in the production of EU policy (Leontidou et al., 2008:170). In other words, it is the breadth of accountability provision and citizen participation in policy formation, which define the extent of the disconnection.

The European citizens become indifferent and abstain from the European elections[4] because in practice and despite the strengthening of the EP's role, they have not seen their elected representatives matching a European decision-making policy-formation philosophy. They primarily act as national representatives abroad, and this becomes particularly evident when the EP's political groups make collective decisions based on national compromise without substantial ideological debate. The political will of the average European citizen is not reflected clearly in the EP because the MEPs mediate it in a complex system of national, ideological, partisan or even personal compromise, which begins long before entering the Plenary. The citizens learn about arrangements and decisions taken on their behalf as in absentia, i.e. without being able to specify the internal mechanism of how their MEPs vote. Therefore, they are unable to reward or punish them like they do with the national MPs (Follesdal & Hix, 2006:553).

Whether or not the democratic deficit is valid, its existence is based primarily on how European politics is theorised as a whole. Democratic scrutiny and transparent participation in decision-making can provide social legitimacy only if it becomes a two-way process that will reconcile the grid of European objectives with the priorities of the societies. To do this, it is vital to involve active and informed citizens into understanding the goals of structural change and into expressing an in-depth evaluation of these objectives. However, the citizen's view should be collected directly and 'as it is' by the EU without getting 'rounded' by mediation. That can only happen with the contribution of the MEPs as true representatives of the constituents, and it is why the EP should become the main forum for the expression of the views and preferences of all Europeans. The MEPs will then become the 'arm' of the citizens, which will constitute representative

[4] As demonstrated in https://election-results.eu/turnout/

and participatory democracy at the European level equally important with citizen representation in the national political systems (Papazoglou, 2010:10-11).

1.3 Political communication during crisis

As discussed in the previous paragraph, whether an actual deficit exists or not, the democratic disconnection is very much linked to the lack of accountability towards the citizens about EU decision-making and their minimal involvement in the discussion about the future of EU integration. The citizens' awareness about the EU is mainly defined by their empirical life and the changes they experience (common currency, passport-less travelling, economic instability, border security, etc.). As the less positive changes intensify and harm their wellbeing, citizens become resentful with the EU leaders and representatives for not clarifying the future goals and policies. They officially express their dismay during the European elections or in referenda and unofficially in the interim polls or by supporting Eurosceptic parties. So far, the acceptance of the integration process among the member states remains high (with the exception of Brexit). However, if the citizens reach the conclusion that the advantages of integration are lagging behind the disadvantages, then their disapproval will dampen the chances of European unification, essentially creating a democratic deficit where one did not exist in the first place (Mousis, 2008:ch1.5.1; Majone, 2006:10).

Regardless of the massive flow of information which practically stems from the EU and the Commission, in particular, Eurobarometer polls indicate that citizens require more transparent information about the EU policies (Bale, 2005). There seems to be a political communication gap, with messages getting transmitted without being received or without being absorbed adequately. There is a possibility that the provided information is not correctly formatted to be consumed by the average citizen and only experts, technocrats, researchers and specialists can locate, collect and analyse it. The lack of accessibility to information or even worse the inability to comprehend it once obtained, accompanied by the influence of misinformation, all swell the dissatisfaction of the citizens about the EU. This dissatisfaction is then extending to attributing responsibilities to the EU executives and especially the MEPs as representatives. The mismatch between

expectations and results leads to indifference, opposition and protest for the 'lack of democracy' (Mousis, 2008:ch10.1.2; Follesdal & Hix, 2006:540).

Within this scenery of mistrust and dismay, the EU has been facing during the past decade an overwhelming economic crisis which brought some of the weaker states like Greece, Cyprus and Ireland to the brink of default. This intensified the feeling of discontent among the citizens and strengthened the voices which favour the reverse of the integration process. The economic crisis hit the weakest EU economies with varying foci and magnitude at different times. Economic adjustment programmes and appropriate financial policies were implemented in Greece, Cyprus and Ireland, aiming at enhancing their eroded competitiveness and correcting their structural economic inefficiencies (Sani & Magistro, 2016). Ireland was the first to face the crisis in late 2008, when the coalition government officially announced (first in the Eurozone) a descent into recession, followed by a jump in unemployment in the following months. The Greek economic crisis started in late 2009 when a newly elected government announced that the fiscal deficit of the country amounted to three times more than previous estimations (Hardouvelis & Gkionis, 2016:5). By May 2010, Greece was forced to abandon the capital markets, following the dramatic downgrade of its economic outlook. In Cyprus, the financial crisis started three years after the blast of the Greek crisis on March 2013, though its nature was different and it was the banking sector which was severely affected (Hardouvelis & Gkionis, 2016:11).

Overall, the sharpness of the fiscal problems, the large imbalances compared to other Eurozone countries, the disparities in the financial sector, the public debts which were considerably increased, the overall poor economic performance, the fiscal relaxation which escalated the aggravation of the economies and the fact that some states did not manage to enforce a clear fiscal policy to the benefit of their respective economies, resulted to reforms, macroeconomic interventions (internal and external) and 'packages' of austerity which were extremely painful (for some states more than others), unavoidably resulting in deep recession (Hardouvelis & Gkionis, 2016:22; Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Avellaneda & Hardiman, 2010:16). In general, smaller Eurozone countries like the ones researched in this study faced a narrower set of political choices to weather the effects of the crisis. Their governments were forced to implement

policies according to external pressures, as the result of the power relations that existed in the internal political scene among different national institutions (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014).

Armingeon & Ceka (2014) point to the fact that, with most of the citizens rooting their assessment of political performance upon economic perspectives, the prolonged financial crisis, in combination with unfulfilled promises by the politicians, played a role to the erosion of public trust towards national parliamentarians, as well as towards international and European institutions (EU, IMF, etc.). According to Foster & Frieden (2017), citizens living in states which were harder hit by the crisis (including Greece, Ireland and Cyprus), were more prone to demonstrate a noticeable lack of trust, in comparison to citizens living in countries with better macroeconomic conditions. The dramatic increase in unemployment, the low levels of revenue and the drop of institutional quality, are factors which provide an adequate explanation for the declining trust, in the countries suffering from the economic crisis (Foster & Frieden, 2017).

The blossoming of protest movements which dynamically unfolded in public spaces was associated with the rising impact of social media. In the framework of the economic crisis and the adverse effects of the austerity policies, social media transformed the inherent loss of trust towards the system of representative democracy and the politicians, to a legitimation crisis (Fominaya, 2017). The widespread flow of information through the prevailing SMPs of Facebook and Twitter contributed to mounting public anger towards the fact that the EU, the IMF and the international financial markets were dictating 'package solutions' or imposing the policy lines that should be adopted by the national political systems in the countries in question. The magnified (through social media) common understanding in the suffering states, was that democracy had somehow lost its efficiency, a development leading to further disappointment for the public when coupled with a widespread loss of confidence towards both the political institutions and the politicians (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). The diffusion of information via social media generated a bias, which emphasised negatively, the relationship between the need for structural reforms in the inflicted countries, the pressure exerted by the international financial markets and the political doctrines, pointing to the implementation of strict austerity programmes (ibid). In all these, the

Troika visits and the tight monitoring acted as provoking visuals in the eyes of the citizens, arousing the feelings of lost sovereignty and hostility towards foreign supervision. With these in mind, it can be argued that the crisis scenery was reproduced online, with social media acting as a multiplier for the loss of public trust. This loss may have been an incentive and motivational cause for some representatives to pursue interactions in social media either because they perceived social media as a mechanism to heal the wounds inflicted by the crisis or because of their desire to protect their political brand. In that respect, MEPs may merely be using social media as brand-enhancing mechanisms, which promote their 'product' to a dissatisfied clientele.

Regarding the end of the multifaceted European crises, the political system has been accused of failing to provide structured and feasible solutions. According to Lyrintzis, most of the proposals are limited in the management of today with no clear vision for the future. As the parties' weaknesses to find long-term solutions turned into political deficits, this allowed the de-politicisation of the system and the emergence of extreme anti-systemic forces as bearers of alternative proposals (Lyrintzis, 2011:20-22). Democratic control and transparent citizen participation in decision-making may reinstate social legitimacy, but for Papazoglou (2010), this requires the activation of citizens towards understanding the objectives of structural changes and formulating an informed judgment on reforms. This judgement, however, should be part of an interactive process of political participation, individually or through organised social initiatives, where the elites or other technocratic groups will not have much influence (Papazoglou, 2010:10-11). The thesis will examine if the use of SMPs can satisfy this requirement.

1.4 SMPs and democratic re-connection

1.4.1 The early years

During the previous decade at the beginning of the internet era, several scholars approached the new developments with an open mind and an optimistic view. Relevant studies were referring to the internet influence in politics by Galais-Gonzalez (2010),

Coleman (2004; 2005); the reformative potential of Web 1.0 applications in politics (blogs/web-pages/emails) by Wright (2009), Kalnes (2009), Jackson & Lilleker (2007), Vicente-Merino (2007), Bentivegna (2006); e-government initiatives and administrative purposes by Deligiaouri (2013), Medimorec (2011), Tapscott (2004); online campaigning by Costello (2012), Jackson & Lilleker (2009); online mobilisation and activism by Breindl (2010); online participation for citizens and parties by Larsson and Moe (2011), Goldbeck et al. (2010), de Zuniga et al. (2010), Wright & Street (2007), Albrecht (2006), Best & Krueger (2005), Dahlgren (2005), Bimber et al. (2005), Dahlberg (2001), Alvarez & Nagler (2000); online political marketing by Jackson & Lilleker (2011); internet in legislatures by Papaloi & Gouscos (2010), Glencross (2009), Dai (2007), Dai & Norton (2007).

Since the proliferation of online communication, many scholars have argued that the reformative potential of the internet can trigger the re-inclusion of European citizens. One of the first who envisioned the online bridging of the gap between citizens and politicians was Coleman. A few years before the consolidation of social media, he optimistically claimed that the internet had the power to bring citizens closer to decision making in a direct and unmediated way transcending the scheduled 'visit' to the ballot box from being the sole means of political expression. He argued that electronic democracy would encourage people to become more informed and mobilised, and these features would marginalise the disconnection of citizens from politics (Coleman, 2004:12-13). Coleman went on to introduce the concept of 'direct representation' referring to a bidirectional communication of citizens and representatives, interacting within trusted public spaces in an on-going manner (beyond the electoral campaigns). In his view, the representatives should be able to provide extensive information to the public about past actions and future choices, thus holding themselves proactively accountable (Coleman, 2005). Medimorec et al. argued that if European citizens could legitimise the political system with their engagement, they would not feel distant and alienated from the decision-making centres of Europe. Exploiting the reformative potential of the internet can help European parties to incorporate more citizen views and preferences into agenda formation, rather than imposing a fixed or lobbied set of policies (Medimorec et al., 2011:12-13).

By arguing that modern democracies should pursue the creation of electronic platforms to help the public monitor and filter the information they receive and be able to create interpretations and political judgments, Coleman established the notion of an 'autonomous network-empowered citizen' who is sceptical to uncritical participation and open to forms of direct and unmediated communication. As a growing portion of citizens is requesting access to a more open and accessible political agenda which can embrace a wide range of social needs without exclusions, traditional political structures (i.e. the parties) should question their attractiveness as hierarchical entities contested by ideological manipulations and unfulfilled promises (Coleman, 2004:18-19). Coleman, considers the new type of networked citizen, as the basis for the formation of a modern civil society, organised in local, national and transnational networks of political communication. In his view, this would allow the accumulation of social capital, the enhancement of political participation and the counterweight of state arbitrariness and absolute political authority (ibid: 15&17). By fostering direct expression of citizen's views, contemporary democracies can achieve increased public participation (both in numbers and quality) and unmediated political communication (ibid: 12-13). As Coleman emphasises, governments should favour online interactions with individual citizens and civilian aggregations, to record and consider their views, suggestions and concerns in an effective manner (ibid: 20-21). Overcoming the 'digital divide' of unequally distributed network access or ICT illiteracy is a significant challenge which has to be addressed in parallel (Galais-Gonzalez, 2010:5; Glencross, 2009).

To Medimorec et al. (2011), political participation refers to engaging in actions of representative democracy. Electronic democracy is all about facilitating citizen participation. In essence, it is the establishment of an ICT interactive process which allows opinion-shaping and decision making for either individuals or interest groups. Participating online is strengthening democracy by promoting change and new forms of communication in the political environment. By surpassing the barriers of time and location ICT offers personalisation, allowing users to customise their interactions, co-produce information and share it cost-effectively and transparently. In practice, internet-based direct decision making was at an early stage (back in 2011), and although social media use had risen extensively, the potential of e-participation was still unexploited in the formal political decision making. The legitimising effect of social

media was occurring in a rather individualistic manner and not through collaborative initiatives. Even so, Medimorec et al. concluded that citizens should try to legitimise the political system with their auditing engagement (Medimorec et al., 2011).

Galais-Gonzalez (2010) argued that as the use of the internet increases, the average ability of citizens to control the politicians effectively becomes more vigorous. Peoples' increasing participation and involvement in an autonomous way, influences the critical production of ideas and proposals, and this is valuable to fight absolutism (Galais-Gonzalez, 2010:2-3 & 7). Engaging in online interactions assists an increasing portion of the public to monitor political decisions and demand accountability from their representatives. To the citizens, using the internet for political participation affirms a sense of belonging in a way that surpasses the vertical integration of the traditional hierarchical entities. To politicians, this alters the traditional relationship between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled' as a growing number of citizens become able to monitor political decision making (Galais-Gonzalez, 2010:4-5; Alvarez & Nagler, 2000:2-3 & 25-27). Bimber et al. (2005), confirm that with the micro-media and middle-media revolution (social networks) people have realised the potential of communicating in ways that a few years back were only available to a few privileged organisations. Tapscott's 'Governance Web' reflects the nature of a cooperative future of networked public services and political processes, ensuring the active inclusion of citizens (Tapscott, 2004).

However, as Jackson & Lilleker (2009) revealed, with Web 1.0 applications, although some modernisation and efficiency emerged, there was no fundamental reform in the concept of representation. With Web 2.0 applications, citizens may be enabled to facilitate their political input towards the online presence of their representatives. However, when Jackson & Lilleker used content analysis to micro-level research the influence of social networking on MP-constituency relations in Britain, the evidence demonstrated that MPs might have used the networks mainly for image enhancement and the representation of their personality, rather than to discuss policies. Only a minority of MPs acknowledged the reshaping potential of social networking by establishing sophisticated interactional links with their constituency. It was unclear if representatives' motivation to use networking referred to electoral, communicational or participatory intentions which could impact their representational practices. The

initial results have not been supportive. It is only a few years since Jackson & Lilleker concluded that 'Web 2.0 has not revolutionised the representative process' and '...the impact of web 2.0 has been marginal' (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009:259). However, the changes in online communication since have been enormous due to the explosive use of platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Since 2009, the explosion of social media participation has been unquestionable, and politicians have embraced the opportunity to engage online. In 2015 almost 76% of all incumbent MEPs used Twitter to communicate with constituents, and by early 2019 the number rose to 88%.[5]

1.4.2 Social media as a means of political interaction

During the last decade, network technology has become an influential factor that defines new approaches and fields of research within the political domain. This is designated by the significant increase in the number of studies examining issues related to the influence of the internet on party reforms, electoral systems, protest mobilisation and electoral campaigning. More specifically there have been studies referring to: e-government initiatives by Stamati et al. (2015); internet use in parliaments by Leston-Bandeira (2014); online preference formation by Oser et al. (2014), Vasilopoulou & Gattermann (2013); online mobilisation and activism by Varnali & Gorgulu (2015), Theoharis et al. (2015). Especially after the establishment of social media as the primary method of networking for the public, several studies have focused upon Web 2.0 platforms (SMPs). There have been a series of studies on online participation by Vissers & Stolle (2014), d'Heer, et al. (2014), Bimber & Copeland (2013); potential electoral benefits during campaigning timeframes in social media by Murthy (2015), Southern (2015), Quinlan et al. (2015), Larsson (2015), D'heer & Verdegem (2014), Marcinkowski & Metag (2014), Frame & Brachotte (2014); online political communication by Lilleker & Koc-Michalska (2013), Karlson (2013), online strategies for branding and political marketing by Pich et al. (2014), Pich and Dean (2015), Lilleker (2015). While the existing literature embracing deliberation, representation and online participation (separately) is vast, there is a lacuna of studies about the use of SMPs as platforms where the MEPs

[5] Visit http://43utcdbre7r3eer0x3d29s51.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/HK-infographic-most-influential-MEPs-on-Twitter.pdf and www.euvisions.eu/mep-on-twitter-european-elections-parliament-2019/ for relevant statistics.

engage in public individualised interactions with their constituents and the impact this has upon representational practices. This is further affirmed by the number of researchers who have been particularly interested in what happens during electorally congested timeframes and not during routine time-frames outside campaigning periods.

Drawing upon Kaplan & Haenlein (2010:60) social media is defined as 'a group of internet-based applications that build upon the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'. There have been studies suggesting that SMPs surpass the static informational role of media by allowing more interactive forms of communication (Larsson, 2015). For the constituents, SMPs present an opportunity to link with their representatives through a participatory behaviour, allowing them to discuss political issues and contribute to policy formation (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013:190-191; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:101). For the representatives, contemporary SMPs provide the opportunity to engage online, offer accountable information to the constituents and a chance to discuss political issues facilitating a more participatory democracy (d'Heer et al., 2014; Frame & Brachotte, 2014). This is important as the EU itself seeks to find ways to further include citizens in the political processes through 'top-down initiatives that will enhance open, innovative, collaborative forms of governance' [6] and explores the potential to facilitate more engaging initiatives over the internet. Emphasising on the individualistic nature of e-participation, Gauja (2015) recognises that the expression of political views derives from the pursuit of personal interests. The modern type of online civic engagement raises questions as to how parties or representatives facilitate and respond to citizens' request for interaction. There seems to be a hollowing effect where the party supporters move from partisan mediation layers towards direct forms of communication with the representatives. In the unmediated environment of SMPs, discussion and reflexivity become the characteristics that promote legitimacy.

The majority of the current work on the use of SMPs by representatives focuses on the campaigning capacity of SMPs, neglecting their potential for routine-timeframe use for representation purposes. As a result, many of the benefits indicated are associated with the image-building capacity of social media for electoral purposes. As Lilleker suggests,

[6] For more details see the EU Council e-Government Visions 2020 Policy Statement

the interactivity taking place online is crucial for the representatives because it can enhance trust and ties with the political brand (Lilleker, 2015:115). This online interactivity refers to the highest existing form of political interaction, which is to have SMP users co-creating content during public conversations with the producers of policy. Lilleker's content analysis of tweets produced by UK MPs from 2007 to 2010, revealed that their online presence is linked with personal image promotion at the local level. Interactivity and co-production of content from the voters were moderate and accompanied by the MPs effort to promote a more humane and less professional side of their personality (one-of-us image). This is due to the interpersonal relations produced by the individualised communications, which reinforced the promotion of a local friendly image. In general, Lilleker views incumbent MPs as promoting the image of 'honest politicians' and 'good human beings', through a personalised brand rather than the party brand. For the constituents, online communication in SMPs is a means to evaluate their MPs and create impressions about their profiles as receptive and responsive individuals (ibid: 123-125). In the traditional methods of contact (appointment booking or web 1.0/email contact), the representatives can apply filters to avoid undesired citizen approaches. In contrast, as Lilleker states, 'in the majority of Social Networks ... public interaction is unavoidable' (Lilleker, 2015:121). The fear of damaging the brand by not responding when publically approached, in most cases, generates some form of interaction, superficial, conventional or substantial.

A recent study by Southern (2015) drawing data from the 2010 UK election, examined the use of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 for candidate campaigning at the constituency level. By testing levels of normalisation, the study concluded that incumbent candidates with larger budgets are more likely to adopt sophisticated high-tech personalised campaign sites rather than low-budget candidates of smaller parties. This is following findings from Marcinkowski & Metag (2014:16) for Web 1.0 use from candidates during constituency campaigning. When we move to the use of SMPs, the scenery changes and the smaller party challenger candidates seem to prevail (Southern, 2015). Taking into account that SMPs facilitate direct communication with the constituents for minimal cost, this raises the question of what would happen in the case of the MEPs during non-campaigning periods. In one of the few studies on MEPs, Lilleker & Koc-Michalska (2013) used content analysis to decode the different styles of interaction between MEPs and constituents.

They established three modes of communication: homemade (informational), impression management (self-promotional) and participatory (argumentative). The latter mode is the one associated with Web 2.0 platforms encouraging participation, enabling discussion of policies, ideas and opinions and eventually facilitating the expression of constituents' views. The two researchers suggest that social networking under this strategy can reshape the participatory process, especially during campaigning periods. However, what happens with the existing representative's brand outside electoral periods, and how is it linked with the overall effort to reconnect citizens with politics?

Most of the incumbent MEPs (more than 85%) use SMPs regularly in their routine schedule, and several members of the public very often decide to interact with them regardless of their location. By becoming politically active, discussing issues, addressing problems, expressing views, proposing ideas, the constituents surpass the traditional geographical or partisan boundaries of communication. This constitutes the SMPs as virtual communities or gatherings of individuals who seek to network and interact with the MEPs out of personal choice. Nevertheless, online interaction with MEPs can limit itself into a transmission of suggestions with no further substance. Responding to these interactions is the kind of behaviour that Pitkin sees as a prerequisite for representation (Pitkin, 1967:224&233). With explicit reference to Twitter, Lee & Shin (2014) through their experimental study, emphasised the platform's popularity as a space where politicians and citizens can directly engage in a visible way. Accessing politicians online and having faceless 'face-to-face' conversations with them, was considered to be an intimate way for developing reciprocal relationships but for what reasons the representatives exploit this option is still unclear. Extending further by focusing on the strategic objectives and motivations of the MEPs when using social media, could be the key to define the potential of SMPs for accountability and policy discussion.

1.5 Rationale, contribution and structure of the study

1.5.1 Rationale & Contribution

The incentive to embark on this research stems from the observation of an increase of online interactions taking place between MEPs and citizens in SMPs which contradicts the public feeling of disconnecting from the process of European integration and the general discontent exacerbated by the various modes of crisis. As the EU is integrating and converging on the foundations of representative democracy and the MEPs, remain a crucial component of the democratic process, the interactions between constituents and their representatives online, raise questions about the quality of representation. As citizens create their impression about democracy through personal experience or information from the media, it becomes crucial to determine the online behaviour of European representatives; how the MEPs view the strengthening of legitimacy through the dissemination of accountable information and the bridging of the gaps through the participation of constituents in policy formation. Thus the thesis explores the relationships that evolve between MEPs and their constituents during online interactions within a social context defined by the crisis scenery.

The study takes into account a series of conditions: the disconnection of the European citizens from the MEPs and EU politics in general, the crisis scenery which exacerbates the consolidated disconnection, the promising but yet unproven capacity of the internet to facilitate processes of substantive political interaction, the increasingly important role of the MEPs as mediators in the integration process and their instinctive tendency to cultivate an attractive profile as political entities who wish to get re-elected. As a result, the thesis critically analyses the reformative potential of the internet over representational practices and political branding in the EU context by focusing on online interactions that take place in contemporary SMPs, examining MEPs' motivations and strategies for online engagement. The knowledge about how the MEPs communicate with their constituents during the non-campaigning routine timeframes and how this affects their practices, remains limited, especially since SMPs were introduced as networking mediums (Farrell & Scully 2007). MEPs are viewed as critical stakeholders whose perceptions and online behaviour affect the process of reconnecting EU citizens

with EU politics, while they try to maintain a strong brand. For this reason, MEPs and their perception are the central points of the analysis of the study. The focus of the research is primarily on discovering the perceptions of MEPs regarding a) the impact on MEP-constituent relations of using social media for online engagement for accountability and policy discussion purposes and b) the motivational scope of MEPs to use SMPs for branding and promotion of their self-interest strategically. As a result, SMP interactions are not analysed from the point of view of the constituents or the prism of social movements and protests or as activities which question the existence of the political structure. They are examined from the point of view of the MEPs and their motivations as transformative elements of representation assuming that if online engagement gets distorted or manipulated by the MEPs, then the citizens will approach it superficially. Similarly, if the citizens use it only as an anonymous act of protest or an emotional pressure-relief mechanism, it may be treated by the MEPs as a convenient image-enhancing opportunity.

Regardless of the nature of their intentions, the MEPs have an advantage over their communicational counterparts, which refers to their elite power position. With SMPs facilitating a more accessible mode of interaction, it is crucial to empirically define whether MEPs have the incentive to represent their personal interests rather than the interests of their constituents. The incumbent MEPs are power-holders, with more profound expertise on EP legislation processes, which they can use for their benefit. Therefore, the study examines whether this positional advantage is used and if it relates to the MEPs adoption of public opinion views or vice-versa. By interpreting the MEPs' perception of the increasing social media interactions, the study determines the level of MEP willingness to use SMPs for branding purposes and whether they perceive any direct communication outside party boundaries, as a new means of political inclusion.

A structurally, methodologically and theoretically sound piece of original work is not necessarily a useful one unless it can offer advancement to the existing body of knowledge or some form of purposeful utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011). In this respect, the study follows the theoretical perspective of Mansbridge's model of representation which has not been applied in the EU setting but is deemed appropriate to combine the various manifestations of MEP behaviour as well as their inherent branding tendency.

Although Mansbridge did not have in mind the case of the EU when she produced her typology, it is the unusual character of the MEPs, which makes this typology applicable. What is interesting about the different modes of representation suggested by Mansbridge is that they are not self-excluding. In fact, in the case of the MEPs, their unique and unusual character is further delimited by the fact that they combine different elements from Mansbridge's typology. MEPs may use, for example, SMPs to anticipate constituents' preferences and grasp public opinion before adapting their behaviour to people's views or before using their 'educative' capacity to influence these views. In this direction, committing online for future voting behaviour in the Plenary is a form of forward-looking or proactive accountability. Another case is for MEPs to choose to become 'gyroscope' representatives by promoting online a brand of integrity and commitment which emphasises the possession of descriptive features (either ideological or personality-led) and provide stability and emotional attachment in a crisis scenery. In another instance, the MEPs who aspire to build a pan-European profile may choose to become 'surrogates' by using SMPs to communicate with non-constituent affiliates or even supporters from all over Europe. All of these non-exclusive cases require the demonstration of a specific behaviour from the MEPs, which affects the way they become accountable and the degree in which they disseminate and discuss their views with the public. The inductive character of the research reflects upon the effort to produce new knowledge by extending Mansbridge's representation theory. By categorising social media interactions according to intentions and interpretations, the thesis builds a new understanding of the underlying incentives for political communication. The thesis contributes to theory by extending Mansbridge's model of representation in the EU setting and the context of contemporary SMPs and by exploring individualised online interactions between incumbent MEPs and the public. It demonstrates how social media can alter representational practices in combination with online branding strategies. This extends the knowledge on branding for political entities by analysing the two prevalent political profiles (one-of-us vs European expert) and their association with descriptive features and the Selection Model as described by Mansbridge.

1.5.2 Structure of the study

This introductory chapter offers a series of essential definitions from the reviewing of existing literature. These depict the conception of the research topic and help readers to position themselves into context, allowing them to indulge in the theoretical framework, which is explained in chapter two.

The 2nd chapter establishes the theoretical framework which the research explores and expands with revelations stemming from a new angle, about the representational practices of the MEPs. At first, the importance of accountability and policy discussion is presented in line with their digital manifestation before referring to the need for image promotion and how politicians comprehend their brand on an individual basis. Then, to place the MEPs into context, visions of representation from some of the leading theorists are presented. A theory of representation based upon J. Mansbridge's work is introduced with emphasis on the Selection Model and the descriptive characteristics. The theory is customised to relate online interactions with MEP branding strategies and how these alter representational behaviour in line with Mansbridge's theory. After the critical evaluation of the literature in the first chapter and the choice of theoretical framework in the second chapter, research questions are produced which justify the importance of the study and are presented in the last part of chapter two.

The methodology chapter (chapter 3) presents the research approach, the epistemological assumptions underlying the research, the methodological tools used for data collection and analysis, data management planning and ethical considerations. As described in this third chapter, an inductive methodological approach is chosen according to the interpretive epistemology that is deemed more appropriate to answer the research questions. The primary methodological tool is the conduct of a series of elite semi-structured interviews with selected MEPs from crisis-inflicted member-states (Greece, Ireland, Cyprus), aspiring to reveal their perception of online engagement. The supportive methodological tool refers to collecting and evaluating content from the Twitter accounts of the interviewed MEPs. Although the interviewed MEPs did not differentiate their given interview answers considerably between the two platforms, Twitter was chosen over Facebook as the SMP case after collecting the views of the

MEPs about the two platforms. In the context of the current thesis, the analysis of Twitter discourse (i.e. the historical footprint of MEPs online) is used as a supporting mechanism for the categorisation of meanings and interpretations and the elaboration of MEPs' claims.

There are four chapters with findings, combining the results from the two applied data collection methods (interviews and content analysis). Chapter 4, refers exclusively to the perception of MEPs about the online scenery and its influence on the volume and type of interactions they pursue. There is no separate collection of tweets for this chapter as the perception of MEPs cannot be matched with particular publically expressed tweets that refer to the scenery itself. As a result, chapter 4 presents the parameters of the external and the internal landscape of the SMPs which affect the political communication that takes place online between the MEPs' and the constituents while designating the overall views of MEPs about the traditional media-social media comparison. Chapter 5 focuses on the motivations and strategies of the MEPs about offering accountable information online with an emphasis on the gap-bridging capacity of this process. Chapter 6 focuses on the motivations and strategies of the MEPs when embarking upon policy discussions with the constituents. Emphasis is given on the potential for an institutional discussion platform that could facilitate the contributions of constituents in policymaking, an idea proposed by MEPs themselves. Chapter 7 focuses on the motivations and strategies of the MEPs concerning their branding behaviour. The emphasis here is on descriptive features and the antagonism between the two profiles of 'European Expert' vs 'One-of-Us' which the MEPs tend to promote online for branding purposes.

The final chapter (chapter 8) first offers vital associations with the theory for each one of the four preceding chapters by interlinking the findings that relate to accountability, policy discussion and branding into a unified framework. It combines the chosen methods of interviewing and tweet analysis, to highlight verifications, contradictions and unclear points. Then the chapter associates the crisis scenery with specific modes of MEP online behaviour creating MEP profile classifications according to motivational categories. Associations of the prevailing brands with the motivational categories and MEPs' partisan affiliation are provided. The limitations of the study are clarified and

combined with suggestions for future research. These help to reach a policy recommendation and the proposal of a social media participatory framework for MEPs with accountability, policy discussion and branding components.

1.6 Conclusion

This first introductory chapter reviews the literature. Elements of literature are used to outline the concepts of democratic deficits and disengagement and the role of the EP and the MEPs, the establishment of a crisis scenery, internet and SMP use. The role of the MEPs within the informational revolution and the optimistic promise for the facilitation of political change is addressed through the prism of a European landscape overwhelmed by citizen indifference and crises. The chapter ends with a brief description of the forthcoming chapters and prepares the readers for the theoretical framework that follows in chapter two.

CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Accountability and deliberation are the two main features of democracy and contemporary representation (Lafont, 2015). As seen in the previous chapter, the lack of related activities is associated with democratic deficits and the disengagement of the public from politics. To bridge the gap between indifferent citizens and the political institutions, many scholars have argued that the reformative potential of the internet can trigger greater inclusion in political life through increased accountability and transparency of MEPs' role and the enhanced participation of the citizens into policy design and decision-making. This chapter focuses on theories of representation and how they accommodate online participation. There is a particular focus on Jane Mansbridge's (2009) Selection Model as a framework which can facilitate the unique features of the MEPs as representatives who may need to apply descriptive features in their effort to shape an attractive profile. The intersection between the crisis landscape, the MEPs' role as representatives and the promotional incentives as described by the Selection Model, formulates a series of questions that this study addresses, shedding light on this under-researched topic.

2.2 Functions of representation

2.2.1 Civic participation

A few decades ago, Arnstein (1969) constructed an eight-step ladder of citizen participation into civic life about how people act within the various layers of power distribution. The first four steps, 'manipulation', 'therapy', 'informing' and 'consultation' involve layers of information exchanges between power-holders (governments, representatives, policymakers) and participating citizens. Arnstein argues that this happens under a power relation which undermines genuine participation. In the 5th step of his ladder, which is called 'placation', people can suggest ideas and proposals, but power-holders retain the right to decide how to proceed. It is the 6th step named

'partnership', where negotiations and trade-offs take place, and people may secure some kind of consent to their proposals. Anything further than this point (step 7 'delegated power' and step 8 'citizen control') involves the altering of power relations resembling direct rather than representative democracy (Arnstein, 1969:217). What is most interesting in this theory is that during the participatory process, the power holders try to shape participants' views according to their interests by exercising an 'educational' function which stems from their expert position and specialised knowledge of the issues. In essence, they use their elite position to 'educate' the participants by 'engineering' their support, thus producing a false legitimisation effect. To Arnstein, this comes from the manipulation of top-to-bottom information flow (ibid: 219).

The transformation of civic participation processes into a medium for the exercise of Public Relations (PR) is something that Arnstein implied as a phenomenon of distorted participation (ibid: 218). As he suggests, in the lower steps of his ladder of participation, the distortion or absence of information creates a fake participatory effect. In essence, people legitimise the participatory process with their participation offering PR gains to the power-holders. In this way, Arnstein gives us an alternative meaning to participation as a form of strategy for the redistribution of social power. Civic participation should be contributing to the facilitation of reforms which improve the sharing of social benefits. If the power relations remain intact, the participation of the weak merely reproduces the existing status quo (ibid: 216). In other words, what is suitable for the people or how people's preferences shape, is eventually decided by groups, organisations or individuals with a higher power who use their expert position to justify their actions when they should have been distributing transparent information that is not available to the masses. Arnstein implies that the representatives will avoid the provision of accountability information or provide it in such a way that their actions will always be justified.

Lilleker & Vedel (2013) similarly acknowledge the importance of a process where citizens pursue engagement initiatives first to audit political actions, then to suggest decision-making contributions and policy proposals or to initiate protest-mobilisations. They suggested a three-layer approach for the exploitation of the internet potential in politics, based on Vedel's theory which considered that the more informed the citizens are, the

more independent the opinions they formulate. Thus 'information' is a vital component of political participation. The 'discussion' of informed opinions between citizens and their representatives follows next, and it has to take place within a public space that both sides trust. The 'discussion' phase eventually leads to a 'mobilisation' phase where networked citizens, engage into the auditing of political actions or provide contributions in the form of policy proposals or protests (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013:3-6). Breindl (2010) also adopted Vedel's three-layer model of political interaction and referred to the second layer as a deliberative process. Breindl suggested that participating in policy discussion requires citizens willing to contribute directly to policy formation within a liberal democratic setting. An 'active' citizen is willing to confront the representatives and express views publically. In Breindl's third layer, the informed citizens transform these views into political engagement via policy contributions (Breindl, 2010: 47 & 50-51).

Several other studies like the one from Wright & Street (2007) suggest that the development of the internet permits forms of interactivity which surpass the static role of communication, facilitating information distribution and deliberative democracy. Dahlberg (2001) was one of the first scholars who recognised the role of the internet as a public sphere for citizen-led public political discussions. Also, Gauja (2015), taking forward Saward's (2006) representative claim, notes that there is an inevitable requirement to catch up with the active public consultation that occurs at the individual level between constituents and representatives. This imposes the opening of political structures to new influences and means of contact. The increasing use of SMPs for discussion purposes is in line with Gauja's statement that political participation is shifting towards unmediated individualised forms of interaction. Inflicted from the development are the institutions of collective action, i.e. the political parties which face a continuous decline in their membership volume. As citizens become more and more detached pursuing individualistic rather than partisan interests, social media can facilitate the opportunity to discuss, propose and promote views and preferences in a synchronous and direct mode (Gauja, 2015:89). The element of individualisation in online interactions is twofold. On one end it refers to the constituents' pursuit of individualistic rather than collective/partisan interests and on the other end, it refers to

the discussion methods and processes that constituents may use to communicate their interests to the stakeholders responsible for fulfilling them.

Breindl also refers to the issue of individualisation concerning political expression in social media. In line with Dahlgren (2009), she addresses social media as a new challenge for political practices, where citizens pursue customised political interventions. These are constructed around their personal interests rather than the traditional political ideologies (Breindl, 2010:44). Walsh (2004: 35) also suggests that political interaction frequently stems from citizen discourse during informal individualistic (rather than collective) engagement. Normative literature has been criticising this concept for some of its communicative elements. The importance given to achieving a consensus (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) by overcoming the distinctions of the participants (Young, 2000) is one; proclaiming a specific rationale based on the 'common good' (Dahlgren, 2005; Tully, 2002) is another. Young (2000:57) addresses the need for equal consideration of all participants' opinions and objects the argument that the distorting influences should be opposed because this blocks the full participation of all citizens in the discussion. Young considers political cooperation via interacting as a more appealing objective than pursuing the unity of a 'common good' (Young, 2000:110).

2.2.2 Accountability & Policy Discussion

Accountability and legitimacy are the main features of contemporary democracy and representation. According to the studies mentioned above, the functions of accountability and policy discussion are crucial to maintaining a participatory framework which can be productive within a democratic setting. Moreover, the individualistic character that these functions form in the contemporary digital world creates for political institutions and representatives new demands for the facilitation of citizen approaches. This also frames the need for accountable explanations together with argumentative justifications of public policy and also creates associations with a type of consent which is different from the one provided when people vote (Chambers, 2003:308). In the traditional view of representation as expressed by Pitkin (1967), the citizens give the authorisation to the representatives to represent them with an election. This authorisation creates the requirement of accountability because the

representatives are being held accountable by the citizens they represent (Pitkin 1967: 38). The normative conception of a mandate-trustee relationship and the promise-sanction duality, remain among the most prevalent highlighting the need for accountability. Accountability nevertheless requires the participation of the citizens in processes of a public inquiry.

Influential theorists (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Guttman and Thompson, 2004; Young, 2000) emphasise how democratic participation goes hand in hand with communication about the issues that affect society, i.e. the discussions that people with common concerns may have, over the policies that should be pursued. This emphasises a view of democracy which embraces the need to exchange discourse in order to reveal citizens' opinions and the will of the general population, primarily since a respectful compromise is needed for the public good (Chambers, 2003). Reflecting Arnstein's (1969) ideas in representative democracies, Urbinati (2000) uses references to Mill to suggest that the public good is not apparent or predefined in advance. Many consider individual preferences as unworthy because the representative's function is to pursue the general interest and the public good. If the public interest were easily specified or predefined, people would pursue it without the need for representatives (or even governments for that matter), and attending self-interest would not require any prior notice. Because this is not the case, discussion remains the primary method to put forward the various interests of individuals in a larger population (Urbinati, 2000:774). A few years after Urbinati, Saward also argued that interests are not transparent or self-evident and need to be publically expressed to be collected. If interests were known in advance or could be easily communicated, people would pursue them without the need of representatives (Saward, 2006:300).

Discussions require a space to develop, a public arena where all who desire to participate can be embraced, just as political decisions affect every citizen (Manin, 1987:52). Friess & Eilders (2015) in their extensive review of prior research, end up with a set of key features (rationality, interactivity, equality, civility, constructiveness and common good) that should characterise interactions which promote policy discussions. Most of the theorists agree that three principal components (dimensions) are required for the construction and performance of a framework facilitating public discussions: a

public sphere with conditions for adequate communication (the design or input), the procedural 'what' and 'how,' i.e. rules for the conduct of communication (process or throughput) and a beneficial outcome (output) that justifies the previous two dimensions and could be a mutual agreement, an alignment of opinions, a clarification of differences, a reconstruction of policies etc. (Friess & Eilders, 2015:323). Dahlgren (2005) had already suggested two forms of informal online political interaction, one where citizens interact with other citizens and one between citizens and the media. Liu and Zhang (2013) extended the scope to interactions between the citizens and the government as a form of quasi-formal direct political participation, linking the public with policy-makers. However, not many studies so far have tried to similarly link the European public with their representatives in the EP.

Wishing to examine MEP responsiveness to their voters, Vasilopoulou and Gattermann (2013) addressed the issue of congruence between MEPs and their constituents on policy preferences. They used regression models based on the 2009 European Election Study (EES) for voters and the 2010 European Parliament Research Group survey for MEPs. Although low response rates on both surveys limit the results, one of their interesting points is that the frequency of contacts between the MEPs and citizens, associate with higher levels of congruence on policy issues (Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2013:620-621). In other words, the more they interact, the more they seem to agree over proposed policies. With social media further facilitating online discussions, the MEPs can either adopt constituents' views and proposals during online interactions or recalibrate constituents' views as a result of their educating influence. As Disch (2011) suggests, preferences evolve with interparty competition as a response to the communication of the elites and representatives with the citizens. This communication has an educational purpose as citizens are 'learning' by participating in a top-to-bottom flow.

To Urbinati, participation is the choice to be present, either in a silent mode or in a participative manner (Urbinati, 2000:762). Urbinati explains that whenever a simple interaction transforms into a substantial discussion of the topic in the public domain (like in SMPs), then it becomes a form of deliberation which links participation and representation as essential components of democratic activity (Urbinati, 2000:759). In

modern SMPs, a constituent may choose to merely observe the comments and the dialogues between MEPs and other participants or embark into an interactive discussion. In the first case, the internet simply facilitates the transmission of a message, and under certain circumstances, it can become a tool for MEP branding activities that reproduce the existing power relations. In the second case, though, the internet becomes a tool for citizens to combine discussion with decision making, thus supporting a representation-participation continuum (ibid: 765-766).

2.3 Visions of representation

Various typologies have been developed as a result of long term debates on the features and characteristics of representation. Pitkin, Mansbridge, Saward, Urbinati, Andeweg and other scholars, have offered explanations for various types, forms and concepts of representation. Representation has multiple dimensions with sometimes conflicting ideas about who should be represented and how. Especially in the case of the EU which has an innovative architectural design, it is suggested that the traditional models of representation which are based on the national political systems are not adequate to explain the role of the MEPs (Hix, 2005).

2.3.1 Traditional typologies

Most of the studies associated with the MEPs are focusing on the more traditional concepts of representation. These traditional considerations are best summarised by Pitkin's work *The Concept of Representation* in the late '60s. Representation is initially understood as the allowance of the 'authority to act' which is given from someone (citizen) to another (representative) (Pitkin 1967: 38). Pitkin suggests a formal arrangement where the action is initiated in time A and terminated or renewed in time B via the same process (elections), after those who authorise (citizens) evaluate the account information that representatives provide. Pitkin (1967) also raised an interesting question about the representation of constituency preferences. If representatives are elected regionally within a territorial constituency, should they pursue their constituents' good or the general/public good? This is a traditional question

which still has a contemporary reference even for this study as the MEPs represent broad constituencies together with national interests and pursue policies for the interests of all European citizens. Concerning the question, Pitkin believes that in order to formulate a general objective for proper representation, we must first take into account the individual or local claims and interests. She views representation from the prism of the representative's independent judgement over an issue which is based upon the general interest of all the constituents (Pitkin, 1967:218). The constituents retain the right to evaluate this judgement and take appropriate action during elections. Total alignment is not a prerequisite. Conflicts with particular constituency interests may arise, and they are acceptable as long as the representatives offer convincing explanations proving that their judgement is not based upon their individualistic benefit (ibid: 209).

To validate the role of the representatives, Pitkin considers expert knowledge as a feature that justifies the importance of having representatives in the first place (Pitkin, 1967:163; Schudson, 1998). Pitkin claims that the majority of voters are mostly uninformed, apathetic, politically inactive or loyal to predetermined agendas. Arnstein would later use the words 'unaware and weakened participating civilians' (Pitkin, 1967:163; Arnstein, 1969:217-218). According to Pitkin, the remaining informed and interested individuals should pursue interactions with their representatives. The response to these civilian approaches is a condition of representation [7] (Pitkin, 1967:233). Unfortunately, the representatives are not frequently consulting with constituents because they receive pressures and demands from various sources and often endure a disagreement as to how to perform their role (ibid: 219). A contemporary counter-argument is that the expansion of technology and social media has made people capable of accessing detailed information about political issues, and the representatives are no longer the holders of privileged information. Thus they should abandon their expert character and allow people to have a say to the definition of policies. Indeed in her more recent work, Pitkin estimates that citizens are nowadays well trained in building a participative character that helps them address issues of greater national and supranational importance (Pitkin, 2004:340). In respect to the MEP-constituent relation, this means that people may choose to address policy issues of great

[7] See also paragraph 1.4.2

national interest regarding the European dimension that will be part of EP legislation like, e.g. immigration, trade agreements, economic reforms etc.

Some more contemporary views on representation include Urbinati (2000), Andeweg & Thomassen (2005) and Saward (2006). Andeweg & Thomassen build upon the principal-agent theory and address the divergence of views on representation between constituents and representatives. Representation from above (representatives' supply) is fulfilled through the provision of accountability while the representation from below (constituents' demand) is fulfilled through the responsiveness to constituents' expectations (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005:511-512). They distinguish representatives as either delegates or trustees[8]. Similarly to Pitkin's questioning, the critical question in this concept is whether representatives should take into account citizen views and preferences (as delegates) or act on their own decisive judgement (as trustees). Urbinati at an earlier time (2000) answered this question by claiming that representation must be seen as future-oriented advocacy that should comprise both the constituents' views/visions and the representatives' autonomy to choose appropriate policy proposals. In this way, representation highlights two main functions, the expression of individual constituent views and the accomplishment of inclusion (Urbinati, 2000:761).

Saward (2006) established an interpretive rather than a normative view of representation. In his view, constituency interests are aesthetically conceived by various audiences which produce different 'codes'. Based on each code, the candidates construct images of their constituencies with different perspectives. To Saward, the various versions of citizens' interests, constitute representation as a twofold process: it is not only the constituents who select their representatives during elections; the representatives may also select to focus on preferred groups of constituents and perform a particular behaviour based on specific characteristics, capacities and features that connect them to those groups (Saward, 2006:301-302). The interesting question about this view in the case of MEPs is whether the MEPs focus on specific 'clienteles' of constituents, promoting features that connect them to these clienteles with loyalty, within the boundaries of large unified constituencies or in the borderless sphere of the

[8] This is the traditional dyadic configuration of normative thinking that Mansbridge considers analogous to the promissory type of representation.

SMPs. European integration requires an ongoing production of policies, which cannot be based solely upon the 'general attitude' of the MEPs to conform to partisan or personal principles, their tendency to be 'pro-EU' or 'anti-EU' or their capacity to select constituency interests. Social consensus is required at the European level regarding policies that affect the well-being of the peoples of Europe. Otherwise, future policies will be defined solely by interests foreign to them (something that Arnstein, Pitkin, Mansbridge and Saward implied in their work).

2.3.2 The alternative approach

A different view comes from Mansbridge (2003), who introduced a typology of representation which goes beyond the traditional promissory model and the principal-agent theory.[9] Mansbridge's contribution is adding a new meaning to accountability and policy discussion. By using deliberative and systemic criteria, she formulated new types of representation, based upon the actions of representatives with regard to their own strategies for election. This way, she is surpassing the Burkean duality between mandates/trustees or that of principals/agents (Mansbridge, 2003:515; Mansbridge, 2011:621). This theoretical focus on the representatives rather than the constituents is opening the way to exploring the motivations of the MEPs in relation to image promotion and how these motivations and consequent strategies define representation in the EP.

Mansbridge first uses 'anticipatory' representation to picture the effort of representatives to predict the future preferences of the constituents before tuning political behaviour accordingly. The representatives have the incentive to anticipate and match their actions with people's views (Mansbridge, 2003:517). One of the requirements of anticipatory representation is for representatives to maintain constant communication with the constituents to 'feed' the anticipation with new data. A few years back, maintaining this communication through media would be a huge burden, and anticipatory efforts would be costly. However, nowadays, with social media facilitating the presence of both representatives and constituents online, the need for

[9] Where representatives give promises and voters hold them accountable for these promises by rewarding or sanctioning them in the next election.

informed communication is better served than ever before. To Mansbridge, this is likely to instigate representatives to 'feed' their anticipation with fresh information from the constituents and then to use their power position to influence constituents' views by using their 'educative' capacity (Mansbridge, 2003:520). This suggests that the MEPs first need to grasp the pulse of public opinion and anticipate the direction of constituents' views. At the next level they can choose to either adapt their standpoints to what the majority of potential voters claim or to try and influence people's preferences from a power position so that when publically expressed, they will be identical to those already anticipated. This also resembles Arnstein's (1969) 'preference engineering' stage and brings forward the educative role of the MEPs.

Mansbridge also introduced the concept of 'gyroscopic' representation. This type stems from the voters' established expectations about what the representatives' behaviour will be like, as their inner beliefs and principles shape the later. It focuses upon the incentive of representatives to act according to their personality values and the potential to get elected because the voters will select them for a series of personal attributes like honesty, integrity, patriotism, etc. Selecting representatives based on the expectation of demonstrating personal integrity and 'honour' to commitments that derive from predefined views, allows the descriptive characteristics to influence the candidate selection. Apart from the similarity of policy preferences, the primary selection features of a gyroscopic behaviour are partisan affiliation, consistency and honesty, good reputation and character (ibid: 521). This type of representation is more connected to distinct personal qualities or partisan commitments and suggests that representatives' behaviour is highly predictable. We should keep in mind here that personality features are often the essential elements that politicians use to shape their online brand through their social media accounts.

Mansbridge views this model of representation as being policy-aligned with the constituents. Thus, the representatives are unresponsive to traditional sanctions (Mansbridge, 2011:622). They do not need to take the constituents' views into account after their election; they simply need to act according to their views and independent judgement (as trustees) (ibid: 624). In essence, the constituents choose from a pool of 'gyroscope' candidates proposed by the existing parties. The degree of the gyroscope

orientation is communicated to the constituents through intermediaries like traditional and social media which create public images of the candidates. Therefore, to avoid the distortion of public impressions, transparency of information is vital for the selection of the right candidates by the constituents (Mansbridge, 2011:622). It is easier for the MEPs to create an attractive profile by using descriptive characteristics and features rather than proofs of policy congruence, especially if the majority of constituents are not entirely aware of the supranational policies discussed in the EP committees. The MEPs, in that case, embark in extensive publicity of those personality features or characteristics that tie them to influential interest groups (e.g. the church, war veterans, alumni, LGBT community, etc.).

Interestingly, Mansbridge emphasises the role of representatives who build trust based on descriptive elements which reflect features of their brand, not just for the constituents but also for citizens from other regions (Mansbridge, 2000:99). 'Surrogate' representation is a popular way in the USA to have some vital interests represented in the assembly. It refers to the representation of citizens' interests by representatives who get elected in different districts. In the surrogate mode of Mansbridge's typology, selecting the representatives has no actual meaning because the constituents can only vote for candidates running in their constituency. If their selected candidate is not elected, the constituents can only hope that another candidate with similar characteristics, affiliations and beliefs will be elected in another district, to represent these beliefs in the legislature. It makes sense to say that surrogate representation needs to be seen systemically. Under this view, for the legitimacy of the political system as a whole, it is crucial to maintain adequate surrogate representation because traditional accountability is non-existent; the representative cannot be held accountable to supporters coming from other districts. That is why surrogate responsibility becomes intense when the representatives share descriptive features and shared experiences with non-constituent supporters (Mansbridge, 2003:523). This is something that may be particularly relevant to the virtual arena of SMPs for candidate MEPs who desire to maintain a borderless image and a pan-European focus.

2.3.3 MEPs and the Selection Model

Mansbridge's departure from the typical rewards-sanctions model of representation was accompanied by the proposal of the Selection Model, which assumes that principals and agents have aligned objectives. The constituents' effort is to select candidates either on the basis of the similarity of their policy views or according to their capacities and personal qualities (Mansbridge, 2009:369). Mansbridge recognises that the constituents' idea of sanctions may always be present in the form of pre-electoral evaluations. However, these become less important when the process of selecting representatives is based upon features like honesty, ability, integrity or policy congruence (ibid: 370 and Mansbridge, 2011: 622).

However, can the constituents ensure that the representatives demonstrate online these elements naturally and not due to their motivation to strengthen their brand to secure re-election? Mansbridge replies that constituents need to locate and select representatives who can at least pursue their interests with honesty even if their intrinsic motivation is electoral. It is quite common in many EU political cultures to assume that self-interest is the primary political motivation and this causes many constituents to express a dislike for 'professional' politicians (Mansbridge, 2009: 372&374-376&378). The capacity of SMPs to facilitate two-way communication in a synchronous and unmediated way makes SMPs relevant to Mansbridge's ideas which in the case of the MEPs refer to whether they demonstrate their inherent features naturally or due to their self-interest promotional motivations.

The requirement of adequate information at the time of selection depends on the ability of the media to reveal the candidate's motivations (ibid: 381). Total alignment often proves to be a utopia. The constituents should allow for a degree of divergence if long-run dedication and creative flexibility can be assured. Descriptive features are in this respect helpful to synthesise a promising profile, and indeed, much of the associated legitimacy comes from descriptive representation (ibid: 380-381). To clarify the internal motivation, one needs to exercise continuous and frequent interaction, both present and historical (the agent's reputation). In those cases where information is not enough for the constituents to make a sound judgement of policy dedication (either because

they are unaware of or indifferent for the political agenda or because there are uncrystallised issues), they select representatives by 'character'.

This is particularly relevant to a polarised landscape (crisis) which diminishes the chances of exchanging objective and well-intended discourse. Choosing character can prove more comfortable than judging policies and usually, the ideal character a voter goes for involves features of his/her capacities or partisan stereotypes (ibid: 381-383). Nevertheless, this character can very well be a construction or a persona created for a specific purpose. Social media can play a crucial informative role by giving constituents access to representative behaviour during service, to help them make judgements before their next selection. At the same time, the incumbent representatives can exploit the use of social media to offer accountable information about their tenure or to shape and reform their public presence to strengthen their brand (ibid: 383). The chosen representatives (according to their principles or character or other descriptive features) do not face immediate sanctioning even if they deviate from the aligned preferences, as long as their motivation for the public good remains unchanged. The constituents can 'forgive' failures and inefficiencies if the representatives fully explain during an interactive process, the situational changes that caused them and prove that the deviation is not the result of self-interest (ibid: 384-385).

Mansbridge insists that this model should not be confused with that of a Burkean 'trustee' which considers the representative to be a 'better' person than the constituents, someone who knows what is best for them through insight and wisdom, i.e. an elite expert. In fact, she argues for the abolition of that concept. The Selection Model is more associated with egalitarian values and candidates who could be 'one of us', which is precisely what voters usually mean when they try to select a 'good man' as a representative (Mansbridge, 2009:386-387; Mansbridge, 2011:623). It seems that Mansbridge rejects the traditional concept of the expert-representative which Pitkin took for granted although both agree that representatives may deviate from the expected-by-constituents behaviour and should be treated with some degree of tolerance until they provide further explanations.

One of the features of the model associated with the search for 'a good representative' is the homogeneity of the constituency. If the electorate is fragmented as it happens in the divided public spheres of the crisis-inflicted states, then the incumbent representatives have to satisfy a majority of constituents with different priorities or beliefs and to have a common feature (either a descriptive one or a policy congruence) is not enough to distinguish a 'good representative' (Mansbridge, 2009:388). As the relationship between representative-constituent becomes more committed and trustworthy, the degree of monitoring depends on the amount of sanctioning that the circumstances allow (Mansbridge, 2009:393 and Mansbridge, 2011:622). As Shafir states, humans make personal choices based on general compatibility or a preferred attribute. When the various actors select counterparts, they do not necessarily prefer those who are objectively deemed to be the best or most rational choice. Instead, they choose the candidates whose social images are similar to their own (Shafir, 1993: 555), i.e. the constituents will prefer the MEPs who look to be most compatible with them in a specific context. On the other hand, this also means that the MEPs will promote in SMPs the brand that will attract the constituents who better match their projected political profile.

Building upon the connection between descriptive features, the Selection Model and the importance of accountability and policy discussion in Mansbridge's theoretical concepts, the study can only assume that in the context of European representation, elected MEPs may interact online for a combination of interrelated reasons. The MEPs may engage in online interactions with constituents in order to strengthen their public profile by highlighting opposing qualities like that of the 'European expert' or 'One-of-Us'. They incorporate branding strategies on the basis of a persona of 'good value and integrity' and use the communicational features of social media to persuade citizens through live interaction. In the present crisis or post-crisis fragmented landscape, they might inevitably use descriptive characteristics and commonalities rather than proofs of policy congruence because most of the constituents are not aware of the supranational policies discussed in the EP and the contribution of the MEPs to policy formation takes a long time to be proven at national and local levels. Thus the MEPs will embark in the publicity of their personality features or of characteristics that tie them to influential interest groups.

The ease of use of social media and the extensive use of SMPs from the MEPs will allow constituents to interact with them to seek vital information and most importantly, to get an insight of MEPs' personality. As more and more constituents contact the MEPs online, every interaction presents an opportunity for brand promotion. The MEPs (especially those elected from a single national constituency which includes territories where the party membership is the only link to their candidacy) may use descriptive characteristics to guide voters towards a 'selective' rather than 'sanctioning' behaviour, avoiding full online accountability (or trying to render it superfluous). Then they may attract the interest of citizens from other regions who view them as ideal representatives not existing in their region/constituency. This is because characteristics that are branded online based on the 'expert' vs 'one-of-us' duality may bring representatives closer to an audience which is willing to disembark from electoral criteria associated with the promotion of national policies.

2.4 Branding incentives for MEPs

The desire of politicians to maintain or improve their public image is associated with the management of their brand. In the early years of the web when no one could foresee that social media would alter the rules of political communication Smith (2001) suggested that image promotion is best conducted through paid media advertising, celebrities and events (Smith, 2001:990). As Pich et al. (2014) state, the concept of a brand incorporates the critical values of a product/service (Pich et al., 2014:1). In a political context with a focus on the MEPs, a brand would have to collect essential qualities as well as distinct personal features, aiming at creating loyalty and emotional attachment (ibid: 2). The brand, as a value-based device, carries a promise and has to be accompanied by a proper communication strategy (ibid: 3-4). Today, online branding can be seen as one of the crucial elements of the contemporary political world for parties and candidates, required for the establishment of a successful political profile. For a branding strategy to be accepted by the constituents, the representatives need to ensure that engaging with them is unmediated, personal and generating options to choose from (no predetermined outcomes). If the engagement with the MEPs becomes

unproductive due to the lack of participants' flexibility or honest intentions, then as Smith (2001) says, the interaction turns into a 'management' of impressions and citizens have no real incentive to participate (Smith, 2001:992).

The brand demands consistency and can be applied both to individuals and organisations (Guzman et al., 2015). Lilleker suggests that the construction of a personality brand stems from observing consistent behaviour. Observing an MEP's behaviour online produces an image which facilitates the processing of information as a shortcut to decision making. It is both about identifying issues and creating a feeling of belonging (Lilleker, 2015:112). A citizen may not need to search for detailed information regarding a specific policy, once the representative's brand is associated with that policy. When behavioural patterns are recognised, relationship building becomes stronger and based upon the style, and the content of the communication, citizens' matching of preferences may become a more manageable task (Scammell, 2015). The sense of belonging, for an MEP could refer to characteristics from the party of the origin or a dedication to a specific cause or idea (e.g. women rights). In terms of a target market, the MEPs' follower base (potential voter base) is what MEPs aim to expand and secure, among others due to an electoral interest. To Pich & Dean (2015), an MEP is considered to be a leader of his or her political brand even when sharing a partisan brand which may be affecting the overall image (Pich & Dean, 2015:10-11). From an aesthetic point, the demonstration of specific personal values may relate to a broad set of party principles or a more individualised agenda (ibid: 12). One of the findings of the study of Pich et al. (2014) on the UK Conservative party, was that at the local level (constituency), the central (party) message might become obscured by issues of local interest (Pich et al., 2014:12-13 and Stanyer, 2008). The degree of adherence to central or decentralised relationships is indicative of the power distribution taking place in virtual environments, where the representatives are free to pursue reciprocal relationships with their electorate as autonomous personalities (Pich & Dean, 2015:13).

With his reference to Cain et al. (1987), Lilleker suggests that by having greater flexibility than national MPs, the MEPs can promote a non-partisan approach to policy formation and thus gain more from a personalised branding strategy towards their constituents (Lilleker, 2015: 121). Lilleker also implies that SMPs like Twitter can be used as an

impression management tool and an e-branding mechanism (Lilleker, 2015:113; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013:193-194). Twitter participants are by default less passive, and twitter discussions offer the necessary elements that Simmons (2007) views as vital for branding: real-time data provided by citizens live two-way interactions, an individualised communication mechanism and personalised content. With an individualised element present in the communication strategy used in the SMPs, MEPs' presentation of the desired identity for self-promotion purposes cannot override the set of values and beliefs already demonstrated in previous online presence. By being an internal stakeholder in the MEP-citizen interaction, private (almost biographical) narratives have taken place forming an identity (Pich & Dean, 2015:14-15). In other words, 'pretending to be someone else' is not a feasible communication strategy in the long run of numerous personal interactions. Branding enhancement within an array of personal principles may be constructively versatile but shifting core values according to the topic of discussion, is an indication of inconsistency. This inconsistency becomes harmful for the integrity of the MEPs and the feeling of trust and inclusion that constituents seek to experience when interacting online with their MEPs.

2.5 Questioning online participation

2.5.1 The social media landscape under crisis

The analysis of the literature so far suggests that constituents and the MEPs are the two sides of the representation coin. The availability of media allows the constituents to seek news and information related to decisions that affect their wellbeing (immigration, security, climate change, pensions, taxation, etc.). They may use this information to form their views about public issues and European policies, influenced by their political affiliations, their collective or personal interests, their self-centred or idealistic beliefs and their general stance toward the EU. Through the SMPs, they can contact their MEPs and interact with them online to request (or demand) more information or to discuss their views and ideas. We must also keep in mind that although the MEPs are elected nationally representing in most cases constituencies, they are obliged to make decisions or promote policies that affect regions much larger than a constituency. For many

constituents (as well as for MEPs) it is not clear whether the MEPs should focus on their constituency's interests, their nation's interests or the general interests of the EU as a whole. On the other hand, to the MEPs, the facilitation of these online interactions in the virtual arena may seem at first as an extra burden among their many other duties, especially if it expands their audience outside the physical boundaries of the constituency. It also requires from the MEPs before deciding which view to promoting, to collect sufficient knowledge on a variety of issues, take into account the standpoint of their national party or EP group for these issues, their personal ethics and what the constituents think.

Mansbridge stresses the importance of the media as an institution with a critical informational role because the voters access the public records of the representatives to receive information which will allow their alignment or deviation. Mansbridge acknowledges that representatives have the capacity to improve this public record with various genuine or performed initiatives (Mansbridge, 2009: 383). Online participation in SMPs allows the opening of two-way communication with audiences from different regions helping the MEPs to enhance their attractiveness to a wider-than-constituency audience at local, national and European levels (ibid:370). This turns the MEPs to 'surrogate representatives', who can attract the interest and support of people regardless of their location.

As Mansbridge (2003) stresses, the quality of communication between MEPs and constituents has a mutually educative character as both parties 'learn' each other's preferences and intentions. But what happens if the landscape of communication is fragmented, biased or overwhelmed with 'noise' like during a crisis? The role of the crisis and the landscape it creates is crucial to this issue, but the inherent pros and cons of the SMPs should not be neglected either. During the crisis due to noise and polarisation, the constituents' judgement may be obscured, or the exchanged information may be unclear. The way the MEPs establish their impression of the virtual framework is therefore essential to understand how they make decisions about the volume of engagement in SMPs and with what justification. Consequently, the thesis must first ask:

Is the crisis reflected in the SMP landscape, and does it affect MEPs' incentive to interact with constituents? Is the MEPs' perception of the internal and external parameters affecting the volume and nature of online interactions?

To establish why the MEPs behave as they do online, we must first clarify their view of the capacities of social media and the benefits they offer. For example, do MEPs embark on their online endeavours because they genuinely want to bring constituents closer to EU decision making? We must also keep in mind that the initial intention is often transformed or adapted to the realities and limitations of the environment. If for example, the constituents avoid interacting for policy discussion with the MEPs, then the later would be forced to utilise their online accounts for different purposes.

2.5.2 MEPs' perceptions of online accountability

The alternative theory of representation that Mansbridge introduced alters the concept of accountability. The departure of Mansbridge from the principal/agent model diminishes the need for constant monitoring and auditing of MEP performance. The anticipatory efforts of the MEPs as they try to match their views with constituent preferences, shift the representation priorities from providing backwards-looking accountability information to interacting and discussing with the constituents in an effort to negotiate the matching of views and positions. This is turning accountability to a forward-looking process (Mansbridge, 2003:520). On the other hand, the gyroscopic type of representation involves representatives who are unresponsive to traditional sanctions because the voters choose them for their descriptive features or their aligned views (Mansbridge, 2003:522).

By minimising the requirement of accountability in this model, it becomes vital for the constituents to have deliberative discussions with the MEPs before the election, to help themselves determine where the candidates stand, in order to predict their future behaviour before selecting one (Mansbridge, 2003:522). The balance of broadcasted accountability changes as it is now the active interaction in SMPs, which assumes the task of aligning voters and candidates. Consequently, the study asks:

What motivates the MEPs to provide information in SMPs about their EP work and activities, and what accountability strategies are they applying online? Is their perception related to fulfilling their representational role or is it about reaching out to the constituents as part of a brand-building methodology?

Most of the MEPs who use SMPs broadcast a series of information related to their work in the EP and the Committees or related to their political causes. Sometimes they upload videos of their speeches, or they link constituents to other repositories where they give explanations about their views and opinions. In this way, they provide accountable information allowing the constituents to become auditors through their online engagement. Online participation is empowering people to question their representatives, not with regard to their democratic authority (which is legitimised from the elections), but in relation to how they use this authority for the public benefit.

The MEPs by providing work-feedback could be seeking to bring people closer to them and strengthen the constituents' feeling of political inclusion, help them monitor the progress of policy formation in the long-run and ensure an enhanced MEP accountability for the shake of democratic transparency. Alternatively, the MEPs may be trying to demonstrate through their performance their inherent capacities as honest, hard-working and considerate representatives, in line with the need to apply a specific brand. The broadcasting behaviour may be considered by the MEPs adequate for accountability benefits, but it can also trigger new interactions from the citizens, especially whenever the MEPs publish material related to their political views on specific issues or EU policies. Mansbridge calls this bidirectional accountability as 'deliberative' or 'narrative' because it informs in a descriptive way about the competency and integrity of the representatives (Mansbridge 2009:384-385).

2.5.3 MEPs' perceptions of online policy discussion

The Selection Model requires an alignment of objectives between principals and agents. This alignment may be automatic when agents' self-interest lies upon the common good or may need to be accomplished through a mode of micro-level communication, inside

the community, at the constituency level or via a direct one-to-one interaction (Mansbridge, 2009: 380). For the successful alignment between representatives and voters, there is a need to first secure a bi-directional communication in order to clarify which are the issues of importance for the public (Mansbridge, 2009: 370). Social media can facilitate this two-way communication synchronously. The contemporary SMPs can be the facilitators of such a communication allowing the exchange of policy views and the expression of MEP intentions. Before the MEPs finalise their policy positions, they usually receive partisan guidance as well as elite and interest group lobbying or influences from other MEPs and take into consideration the balances they must preserve within the EP framework. Combined with the natural desire for re-election, these parameters impose a series of compromises that shape MEPs' policy-making interventions as well as the communication with the constituents.

The fact that people can log-in into the virtual environment from another region or country does not diminish the relevance of their interaction. The MEPs engage in policymaking that has a local, national and supranational scope. Consequently, they are not solely associated with constituency interests and the constituents should not 'measure' them only based on policies which explicitly affect their region. This also allows the initiation of interactions and the receipt of suggestions from residents of different constituencies or even EU states. However, if the constituents respond to or initiate policy exchange instances and proposals/ideas are submitted online, the MEPs would have to define criteria about how to decide which ones should contribute to policy formation. Those suggested by the majority of constituents? The ones which are more feasible or convenient? Or those in line with the partisan agenda?

An increased flow of information from the demand side (constituents) could help the MEPs to shape and supply policies according to public preferences. On the other hand, increased participation provides the MEPs with the opportunity to influence those preferences. The argument is that if online participation turns MEPs into claim receptors, then the gathering of claim-offering citizens online would motivate the MEPs to try and shape their preferences. Would that be necessary? When the MEPs choose to engage in policy-discussion interactions, then they may face the dilemma of whether they should try and persuade their counterparts about their arguments. This

persuading requires an approach which involves explaining how the EP works, how they reach decision making, why they vote the way they do, what lobbying and other processes have to do with it etc. Meanwhile, they may be using their power position and inside knowledge of EU processes to constitute their arguments stronger and constituents' views less realistic, as citizens formulate their views mostly according to what they learn from the media. Consequently, we need to ask:

> *What motivates MEPs to initiate or participate in policy discussions in SMPs and what strategies are they applying? Is their perception related to allowing constituents to co-produce policies or to 'educating' them about their views? Is this perception influencing MEPs' priorities regarding their social media presence?*

The descriptive character of the Selection Model implies that it relies heavily upon the information that constituents receive regarding the representatives' behaviour, views, intentions and motivations. The degree of constituent satisfaction relates to the establishment of a communication channel where interactions and discussions can take place so that the representatives can clarify their policy views (Mansbridge, 2009:391-392). With the domination of the SMPs in political communication, the constituents become virtual participants. They are not just voters who register to vote in a specific district or citizens who simply 'follow' the MEPs' social media accounts. The SMPs require from the informed and interested constituents to keep track of the MEP's public manifestation before getting into an interaction. In other words, to have some prior knowledge of the background, current affairs or the context where the MEP works. In this respect, e-participation reflects a considered decision to engage or else a genuinely democratic choice.

2.5.4 Descriptive features and online branding

Elected MEPs may choose to interact online with the public for a combination of interrelated reasons. MEPs who get elected in regional constituencies (e.g. Ireland) may want to strengthen their ties with local constituents by focusing on the policies that affect the region where they get elected. On the other hand, MEPs who get elected in

single national constituencies (e.g. Greece and Cyprus) may feel that it of critical importance to reach out to voters from territories where they have no link or connection other than partisan affiliation. In this case, it may be in the MEPs' interest to avoid following a sanction/reward style of representation. The alternative is to guide the constituents/voters to a more 'selective' method based upon 'descriptive' or character features or to a specific 'profile' of candidacy.

The term 'descriptive' refers to the characteristics or properties of the representatives which explicitly match those of the represented citizens or groups. They can be visible (e.g. skin colour, gender, language, ethnic origin), refer to common backgrounds and experiences (e.g. profession, studies, military experience) or focus on values-ideas and inherent personality features (honesty, patriotism, religiousness, etc.). Some of those features have a permanent character and others can be altered or abandoned (Mansbridge, 2000:100-101). In contrast to normative scholars who had negative assessments for descriptive features (Pitkin, 1967; Kymlicka & Norman, 2000 etc.), Mansbridge argues that they can contribute to substantive representation, in the case of unclear or vague issues/interests (e.g. when the policy agenda is yet to be defined) or whenever the level of mistrust between constituents and representatives is high (like in the case of the crisis). In those cases, descriptive representation becomes a mechanism which brings a proportional representation of interest groups in the legislature according to the population synthesis and the general public good (Mansbridge, 2000:102-103&105). The above behavioural descriptions become relevant when someone thinks about the vagueness that exists in the minds of EU citizens before the EU elections (about the policies that each party-group intends to promote in the EP). They can also relate to the mistrust demonstrated by the public during the period of the crisis against the political personnel regardless of partisan origin.

As Mansbridge (2003) stresses, when the representatives align their interests and posture to that of the majority of constituents, the later can use descriptive factors as predictors of suitability and make electoral selections based upon actions which take place during routine-timeframe behaviour inside or outside the legislature (ibid: 115-116). With the MEPs often voting independently of their parties or the EP groups, they may use this incentive of similarity to promote actions that reflect the way constituents

think, especially for issues of descriptive reference (ibid: 114). In this respect, they are more likely to attract the attention of constituents from other districts and eventually act as surrogate representatives promoting issues of descriptive nature (ibid: 117). The 'psychological' benefit is a 'de facto' legitimacy with substantive consequences for citizens who would otherwise feel secluded from both the deliberative and the legislative process (ibid: 121).

The surrogate type of representation suggested by Mansbridge can become descriptive when a surrogate representative promotes issues related to descriptive features that surpass the constituency boundaries (Mansbridge, 2000:112-113). This is especially true for most of the MEPs who get elected either in unified national constituencies (e.g. Greece, Cyprus) or in larger territorially merged constituencies (e.g. Ireland) because constituency homogeneity is essential to surrogate representation. Representatives in such enlarged constituencies become more focused on satisfying the selection criteria of the majority of constituents and might ignore or neglect specific minority issues. These minority issues and the constituents pursuing them might seek associations with receptive representatives in other districts (Mansbridge, 2009:389). This form of representation is also associated with subgroup tensions that corrode the participatory unity and with a homogeneity of electoral districts, which causes reclusion rather than inclusion (Mansbridge, 2003:110).[10] There is no power-relation between the surrogate representative and his/her supporters. Their relation is informational and deliberative, with the constituents providing their insight on the issues of interest, expressing their approval/disapproval without the presence of coercive power. Ideally, a free and equally balanced discussion of the issues/policies takes place in advance, to inform all sides and assure the proportional representation of the conflicting interests of the constituency in the legislature. The surrogate representatives will eventually promote those issues which are closer to their inner values and personal identities (just like the gyroscopes) (Mansbridge, 2003:525).

[10] Example: In the 2015 national election in Greece, all three seats in the Northeast region of Rodopi with a 50-50 balance of Christian and Muslim constituents, were taken by Muslim representatives from various parties. Visit:
http://ekloges-prev.singularlogic.eu/v2015b/v/public/index.html?lang=en#{%22cls%22:%22level%22,%22params%22:{%22level%22:%22ep%22,%22id%22:%222%22}}

Descriptive representation creates a form of loyalty, which decreases the need for accountability because the constituents take for granted that the representatives who possess the preferred feature can do a better job than anyone else without the feature (Mansbridge, 2003:110). Mansbridge (2003) argues that as the participatory process becomes attainable, the need for descriptive representation becomes less critical because more and more people from interest groups and sub-groups find their way through to the representatives (ibid). The increased use of SMPs provides a theoretical basis for this argument. The increasing familiarity of the public to use mobile devices and Wi-Fi becomes a norm, permitting costless, individualised and on-the-spot access to MEPs' social media accounts. Therefore, one would expect the incumbent MEPs to embark on more online discussions with interested citizens without the need to adopt descriptive rhetoric. In that case, the descriptive claim that many MEPs use, i.e. that they are 'one of us' (meaning the constituents), is in reality, a branding statement concealing an electoral incentive. Inevitably the study must ask:

> *Is the creation or enhancement of the political brand a motivational factor that defines MEPs' online activities and interactions? What type of representation profile prevails among the MEPs and what branding strategies do they apply?*

The ease of use of SMPs in combination with the extensive use of the platforms from the MEPs, allows constituents to interact with them to gain both vital information and insight of MEP's personality with every interaction also presenting an opportunity for the promotion of MEPs' brand. According to Mansbridge (2009), the rational interest of incumbent MEPs to strengthen their public brand is not incompatible with the Selection Model. The MEPs may have a strong incentive to use their social media accounts for the purpose of broadcasting their personality features, emphasising the profile of 'good value and integrity' instead of a European 'expert'. The MEPs can incorporate branding strategies based on such a profile and use the communicational features of SMPs to persuade citizens through live interaction. It must also be highlighted that in various theories about the communication between representatives and constituents, a common feature is that representatives usually interact from an elite position, which gives them the incentive to 'guide' constituents' selection. In the

past, this was associated with privileged access to information which was not available or transparent for the majority of citizens (Arnstein, 1969). Nowadays, the use of social media and the dissemination of information gives people access to an updated bulk of the information flow. Although this may be reducing the elite character of the MEPs and their sophistication as experts with inside knowledge, they may still be motivated to 'educate' their constituents in order to enhance their political brand. For these reasons, the thesis needs to embrace the issues under question in order to clarify and reconstruct a modern framework for online participation.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented theories of representation, aiming at the creation of a framework for online participation. Emphasis was given to the Selection Model (Mansbridge, 2009) and the use of descriptive features, to establish a conceptual framework for MEPs' online behaviour. For the requirements of this research, representation is viewed as a concept where social media and e-participation can demonstrate their transforming power, linking branding and representational practices. It is not in the study's intentions to initiate a philosophical debate about the substantive nature of representation in general. Thus the thesis is adopting Mansbridge's view of representation in relation to the nature of the Selection Model and the potential branding features used by the MEPs online, designating how the use of SMPs by the MEPs can contribute (or not) to the re-connection of EU citizens. After visiting the concepts of accountability, policy discussion and branding, the thesis puts forward a series of research questions. In the next chapter, the focus shifts to outlining the methodology of the research and the procedures that need to be performed for the collection and analysis of research data.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Introduction

Every research study incorporates the researcher's passion for examining and discussing a topic of interest and significance, one that could improve the world through the production of new knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008:15). Especially in social science, research is often driven by the passion for providing answers, explanations and alternative solutions to issues of social importance. Social science is thought to bring order to an otherwise disordered scenery (Law, 2004:2). Exploring a research vision successfully and coherently requires the researcher to be able to position the topic within an ontological and philosophical background before formulating research questions and adopting tools and methods (Brand, 2009:431-432). The methodology is a process of contacting and delivering answers to a research investigation and is of central importance to the guidance of scientific thinking (Cryer, 2011:5). The following discussion positions the research within the interpretive prism before outlining the processes of data collection and analysis. It finishes with an examination of the ethical dimension of the research and its adherence to principles of research integrity.

3.2 An interpretive approach to online behaviour

The ontological and epistemological framework represents a set of principles upon which the researchers materialise their ambitions and inspirations. For the requirements of this study, the online behaviour of the MEPs is examined through an interpretive prism. The objective is to surface and elevate the perspective of the involved MEPs in order to comprehend and evaluate the factors that lead to specific behavioural outcomes (Héritier, 2008: 64). It is the participants' own experiences that build their inner perspective and constitute the meaning of the interpretive aspect of this study (Hennink et al., 2011:14), as the MEPs' social actions within the context of their political life define part of the social world (Snape et al., 2003:7). The study seeks

to reveal views, subjective impressions and inner motivations rather than to measure the results, characteristics or aspects of the MEPs' online presence.

3.2.1 An inductive reasoning for online participation

As Mason states, every scientific investigation should consist of philosophical and methodological underpinnings, which empirically define the techniques necessary to reach the researcher's goals (Mason, 2002:3). The researcher is obliged to ask questions that produce answers which bring people closer to the essence of reality. The process of acquiring knowledge incorporates the design, application, analysis and dissemination of the research (van Deventer, 2009:45). Ontology (based upon the question 'what is' or 'how things are') is the search to understand where we come from, the kind of reality we live in and defines our everyday experience in the world (Fleetwood, 2004:2; Hennink et al., 2011:11-12; Mason, 2002:14 and Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:108). The ontological standpoint of this project is that reality is not unique and specific, value-free, separated and quantifiable; reality is socially constructed consisting of meanings and human interpretations of the various interactions and communication (Hennink et al., 2011:14). The world is complex and fluid rather than predetermined, and people construct the pillars of social life through a variety of engagements. Social interactions change the world by creating new meaning, which different actors interpret in different ways (Corbin & Strauss, 2008:6-7). Reality is thus perceived individually, according to someone's experiences, values, beliefs, understandings and relationships, and it cannot be understood in absolute terms (Brand, 2009:438; Ponterroto, 2005:130). Our future decisions and actions are shaped according to what we know, learn and understand. Past experiences and impressions influence our future activities towards the reproduction or the transformation of existing social entities (Fleetwood, 2004:21).

Epistemology (based upon the question 'what we know') defines the extent of our knowledge of the world, the kind of knowledge that can be collected and what we can do with it (Brand, 2009:437&448; Mason, 2002:16; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:108). The social world consists of political entities (governments, parties, institutions, representatives, citizens, etc.), which were initially established as conceptual objects stemming from social interaction. The discourse created by these different stakeholders

generate effects, consequences, practices and structures which are socially viable and as such, they are in constant flow and transformation. The phenomena deriving from the engagement of people with political structures imply cause-effect relationships because being human-dependent means that the structures change according to individual choices (Fleetwood, 2004:12-13&26). However, although research in politics is about exploring the causes of the political phenomena, to determine causality, i.e. the regular association of factors with relevant causes, is not an easy task (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2008:4; Beach & Pedersen, 2013:24). The reality which characterises the EU today is being shaped throughout time from the numerous human interactions that form a political, cultural and economic environment. It derives from the way we experience the world, and our position within a social environment shapes it with structures that we may or may not take for granted (Fleetwood, 2004:5; Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2005:9-10). Although these structures seem solid and established with underlying mechanisms in place, they remain relational. They depend upon stakeholders entering into relations from a specific power position and engaging into practices relevant to this position (May, 2011:11-12).

Epistemologically, this study produces new knowledge by analysing the relationships between MEPs and their constituents during interactions that take place within a new social reality, which is now dominated by social media and internet interactions. The EU and the European institutions are social structures conceived and produced by humans. Therefore they are human-dependent and can be transformed by them. They impose specific actions and behaviours of conformity, which make potential transformation look like a slow process, but change is always an option based on mutual decision making (Fleetwood, 2004:441). Although the existing relations within specified social structures dominate the communication between the stakeholders, over time the synthesis, definition, scope and influence of these structures are open to change, and the involved stakeholders can redefine their relationship (Fleetwood, 2004:18-19). Thus, it is people's interpretation of the existing relations which becomes subjective according to the environment they live in, their position in it, the particular circumstances, and the potential consequences for their well-being (Morgan, 1980:608). In this respect, SM and the internet in general, can either be seen as factors that redefine the existing political structures and relationships in favour of the citizens or in contrast, as mechanisms that

support and extend the elite position of political representatives. When these human interpretations become conflicting, stakeholder interaction may lead to a discussion or debate, especially when people become members of social groups and subgroups with different interests. Therefore, a means-ends approach envisioning in advance an end-goal is not adequate to reveal and explain the wealth of meanings that surface during discussions and debates (Corbin & Strauss, 2008:7-8).

This perception suggests a methodological approach and methods for the collection of associated data that build knowledge on the assumption that if reality is socially constructed, then only through the direct interaction of the researcher with the participants, it is possible to synthesise it (Ponterroto, 2005:131). Methodology (based upon the question 'how we learn') relates to the nature of the tools that we use to obtain knowledge through enquiry (Brand, 2009:434-435&448; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:108). Therefore, it is qualitative methods in this project that help to approach the inner view of participants, connect with them at a human level and determine meanings associated with their behaviour. The view is that this is the way to accomplish meaningful, open-ended dynamic discoveries far more than by exercising structural testing upon a set of hypotheses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008:12-13). The process of generalising based on observing social phenomena in various time instances is not always feasible, especially for those phenomena in politics which involve inner motivations and unpredicted human behaviours which cannot be measured or directly observed (Jackman, 2008:118-119; Schwandt, 1997:57). As the researchers cannot always be physically present to measure the phenomena, they are obliged to use the impressions of the involved agents and their judgement to create inferences. This by no means reduces the importance, validity or credibility of data which is gathered this way (Denzin, 2009:140-142). For this reason, the intention is to use the MEPs' impressions in order to recreate the social reality of social media. It is qualitative approaches that help the emerging of rooted impressions by allowing the protagonists of the phenomena (MEPs) to directly produce in-depth narratives through the description of their views and experiences (Vromen, 2010:256-257). The analysis of such discourse creates a more comprehensive framework to examine the particular circumstances of actions and behaviours (King et al., 1994:4).

The scope of the study is not to empirically measure and verify the technical aspects of the facilitation of politics by social media. It is to establish a relationship between the influence of social media upon political accountability, policy discussion and branding, according to the perceptions of the MEPs who are seen as stakeholders who shape with their behaviour, the transforming character of representational practices in the EU. In this respect, a positivist approach is considered inconclusive. A positivist standpoint would consider the outcomes of social interaction between MEPs and their constituents as lying upon objective, quantifiable causes, which produce time-free generalisations observed from a distance. The researcher's duty would then be to collect comparable data from a prior and a later timeframe and answer research questions in a numerically validated way (May, 2011:10). Although certain cause-effect aspects of online political interaction may be revealed this way, the magnitude and the versatility of relations between the stakeholders requires more than observing social outcomes or measuring communicational parameters. An interpretive stance refers to the sense-making of the nature of given relations (Brand, 2009:436). The collection of data stemming from online interactions of MEPs and constituents are related to their interpretations of political reality from different perspectives and standpoints. They are also collections of various expressions of existing power relations between them. Although our position in society is not defined by how we interpret these relations, it is our interpretation which influences how much we accept this position (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:28-31). A qualitative methodological approach is more appropriate to reveal the intentions and perceptions of the participants. Qualitative research is more about exploring and generating theory, rather than measuring and testing hypotheses and this requires methods that allow flexibility and questions that are open to various (yet not unlimited) solutions, which is why the researcher should expect new questions or sub-questions to arise under such a methodological process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008:25-27).

The interpretive approach views participants as the primary source of data and their meanings and understandings as keys to define methods of data collection. By capturing 'individual stories' from a chosen sample of MEPs, this study delimits the context in which MEPs take executive decisions about accountability, policy discussion and brand promotion. The use of MEPs' views, meanings and understandings as a primary source of data is critical to define their inner incentives (Mason, 2002:56). The perspective of

this study is what Mason calls an 'insider view,' i.e. studying the subjective meanings that MEPs attach to their experience of online interaction with constituents. The intention is to create further understanding as to how the MEPs perceive the process of e-interaction and if this alters the existing patterns of political representation (Mason, 2002:56; Morgan, 1980:608-609). The researchers who prefer qualitative approaches try to view the various concepts away from their procedural essence, aiming at their true meaning as created by human interaction within a social context. The aim is to use theory and method for the creation of new knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006:5&29). Under the scope of an inductive approach, the data collected this way become the vehicle to reveal the underlying relationships between the involved actors (Eisenhardt, 1989:538). By establishing a meaning-making partnership, the study embarks on a journey to produce new knowledge and gain insight related to the research questions (Bryman, 2012:471-472). A deductive approach would be justified if there was a concrete theoretical claim or a delimited hypothesis that required testing through the collection of data in order to be accepted or rejected. This is not the case in the current study, and that is why an inductive approach is used. The inductive approach starts with observation. It is the observation of the phenomena by the researchers that intrigue them to search for meaningful answers. In this study it is the SM behaviour of the MEPs from three crisis-inflicted states which is observed, leading to the formulation of research questions that need to be explored in depth via qualitative methodologies in order to produce broader generalisations.

3.2.2 Qualitative techniques to reveal MEPs' perceptions

The decision to seek meanings, interpretations and perceptions surrounding online interactions between MEPs and their constituents, favours a methodology of qualitative nature. The tuning of the research questions and methods derives after ontologically accepting that people's views and perceptions define social reality and by epistemologically declaring that relevant data generate through the exchange of discourse with the participants. A natural inquiry process is more methodologically suitable; thus, qualitative interviewing is the main technique used to accumulate data from the MEPs' (Ponterroto, 2005:132). The research interview represents one of the significant techniques of the qualitative arsenal allowing for intangible benefits to occur

when used in its more open forms. In-depth semi-structured interviews are one of the chosen data collection methods for reasons closely related to the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions characterising the topic of this study. The methodological strategy resembles a developmental process where participants' perspectives will be used in relation to an ongoing phenomenon (online interaction). Collecting MEPs' experiences and views, yields inferences on the participatory effects of the internet and the changes that this phenomenon brought to MEPs' relationship with the constituents (Mason, 2002:31-32; Hennink, 2007:4-5).

The value of the semi-structured interview lies in the lack of fixed predetermined questions that need to be asked in a specific order and with a particular manner (King 2004: 15). It is the context of the interview and the personality of the interviewee that mostly define the parameters of data collection and this can have good and bad outcomes. The benefit of semi-structured interviewing is that it produces new data from the combination of the participant's answers, which are not prescribed according to predefined questions. Instead, they emerge from the 'liberty' that is given to the participants to expand their narrative around the theme of discussion. This new data would not have been brought out to light under a strict question-answer mode, which considers the MEPs as broadcasters of information (Marvasti, 2004:29). On the other hand, a mere analysis of social media content would only imply their existence. Simply observing online discourse (tweets) and assessing it with quantitative tools or discourse parameters, would not reveal the insights of the protagonists, i.e. the MEPs. It is the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer that helps to make sense of the extent of MEPs' embracement of SMPs as mechanisms of representation and branding.

The purpose of the qualitative interview is for the researcher to see the world with the eyes of the participants and understand why they adopt a particular perspective (King 2004:11). The interview is not a mere interaction between two parts. The researcher encourages directly or indirectly the interviewee to participate, giving more of his or her time by forming a special relationship (Bryman, 2001:114; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:2). Through this relationship, the researchers explore events and experiences in which they did not necessarily participate and use the interviewees' perspectives in order to

discover relations and values (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:31). This qualitative knowledge of subjective values and experiences would have remained inaccessible without the contribution of the interview method (Peräkylä, 2005:869). As it becomes apparent, the qualitative interview is ideal for the emergence of the inner motivations of the MEPs and is the best way to bring this research topic to life (Stedward, 1997:151). Each interview represents what Kvale calls 'description of the life-world' of each participant, meaning that it constitutes an interpretation of the meaning of the social phenomena under research (Kvale, 1983:174). The obvious benefit is that this allows for the building of an understanding of each participant's online experience viewing MEPs as primary agents of political communication who use their own words to reproduce reality. The big question here is whether the MEPs reproduce their past experience objectively or if they only offer a set of impressions about it, i.e. their socially constructed perspective. The way forward, in this case, is to make as King says, 'realist assumptions' about the collected material. In the case of this study, the perspective of MEPs is having the utmost importance, as it is this perception that reveals their overall view of SMPs as representation mechanism, defining the extent and type of activities which the MEPs perform online (King, 2004:14).

Being able to use the MEPs native language (being a native Greek speaker and a fluent English speaker), facilitates the interview process, which becomes faster and smoother. Language is a significant issue for the success of an interview and fully understanding the expressed meanings is vital to avoid wrong interpretations (Bryman, 2012:363-364). Having to elaborate on the meaning of vague questions can jeopardise the time-frame of the process as interviews (especially in the case of elite participants) have a specified duration. Thus the flow of questions is essential, and once the flow is constant, motivation exists without great effort (Burns, 2000:426-427; May, 2011:142&146). This also implies proper knowledge of technical terms associated with the topic of discussion. In some cases, simple everyday words used in slang expressions, may create misunderstandings or sound derogative to participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003:74). When interviews are conducted in the researcher's native language with participants of the same origin (like in the case of MEPs from Greece and Cyprus), apart from expanding the linguistic scope of the discussion there is also a lack of cultural difference which

eventually leads to interpreting the full meaning of the answers (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003:435).

Given the power position of the MEPs and their uniqueness with regard to their elite political role, the semi-structured interviews have the character of an elite or expert interview as defined by Flick (Flick, 2009:165-166). An elite interview is more distinctive among other types of interviews as it is defined by a special type of participants with a position of power, high status and influence in the decision-making processes, who are established figures considered to be experts and specialists in the topic of study (Leech, 2002:663; Burnham et al., 2008:231&233; Manheim et al., 2012:302-303). The so-called elite participants are, in most cases, essential sources of information. Because of their position, they have insights of the decision-making processes and can help to formulate inferences about the decisions of political actors and institutions, by revealing the informal considerations that contribute to decision-making (Tansey, 2007: 4&9). The elite interviews are efficient when used in parallel with other data collection methods. In fact, they often link or relate to information that can be collected from other sources (ibid: 6). As Goldstein states, elite interviews can extend the scope and context of the topic when used to inform the research in combination with other data sources (Goldstein, 2002:669). In the case of the MEPs, the collection of their SM content alone, would not offer the level of analysis required to surface the inner motivations to use the SMPs. Similarly, the elite interviews alone would not give sufficient indication of the MEPs claims unless they were verified by their historical footprint in SMPs.

Face-to-face interviews are considered to be the popular research technique in social science and the most effective when collecting qualitative data (Opdenakker, 2006:2; Holt, 2010: 113). They establish communicational channels with the sources of data which are personal and intimate (Block & Erskine, 2012:435). One point for consideration here is the 'social desirability' flaw, i.e. the participants' anxiety to be socially desirable which makes them present their views and positions not as they are but as other people would like to hear them (Tansey, 2007:10). Especially with elected political actors, this creates the danger of distortion of their views due to their need to be well received by potential voters. In an interview with political essence, the interviewee always tries to retain control of what to say, organising thoughts and

deciding upon the most appropriate answers. The associated danger is not to allow participants to manipulate the answers as they 'should be' rather than as they really 'are' (Morgan, 2004:249&261). This form of empowerment of the participant is endangering the control of the research process, especially when power relations pre-exist. It can be demanding to constantly 'adjust' the questions or probe within the limitations of existing power relations or time limits, but it is the only way to ensure there is no manipulation into presenting things the way the participants want. Eventually, it is the interviewer who can change the dynamics by generating new questions and directions. In contrast to forwarding predefined questionnaires and receiving predetermined answers, the semi-structured interview is a technique allowing for intangible benefits to occur. The connection between the questions needs to be adequate so that no spaces of silence are created due to the inability to link the produced answers with the discussion theme. Asking open-ending questions is vital to avoid predetermined or fake answers, and the use of prompts during the process creates a share of power balance because the interviewed person is not intimidated by the repetition of questions, it comes as natural when meanings are not instantly produced (Gilbert, 2008:249; Bryman, 2012:331-332).

Taking into account that MEPs are elite members with limited time and dispersed geographical presence which demanded a more prolonged stay in Brussels and Strasburg, a backup plan considered the possibility to conduct some telephone or Skype interviews. The positives of this arrangement would be that distance and time differences would be overcome, resources would be saved, and the MEPs could be accessed from any location. Unfortunately, disadvantages like awkward probing, poor engagement, lack of trust or technical connection deficiencies can always endanger the process (Bryman, 2012:663-664&666-668; James & Busher, 2006:406&415-416). Something else that is common during telephone interviews is that the participants often talk about generic issues avoiding the juicy topics enlarging the possibility of 'ambiguity' (Gilbert, 2008:476). The associated danger is to lose focus of the research topic by drifting away with general narratives (Burns, 2000:428). The apparent problem with non-physical interviews is the lack of eye contact and the requirement to rely on verbal communication (Block & Erskine, 2012: 435). In the case of Skype interviews, this is resolved, but Skype interviews may not always be convenient because they require

technical arrangements. Another danger is that there is not enough trust developed between the researcher and the participants, because of the physical distance. Listening to a voice from a distance might inflict the spontaneity of the responses and eventually the duration of the interview and the degree of detail or elaboration of the findings (Opdenakker, 2006:7; Irvine, 2011:203). Overall, the data gathered through the telephone is by no means considered much different from that collected via face-to-face interviews (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Block & Erskine, 2012).

As Manheim et al. suggest, more aspects of the research topic emerge during the interview process, providing opportunities for more in-depth understanding (Manheim et al., 2012:301). Bryman verifies that the interviewer may have to ask more questions generated by the responses of the participant and has to maintain flexibility in the order of questioning (Bryman, 2001:110). Cultural differences (anticipated for the Irish sample) are one of the major issues during interviews which may provoke responses of surprise or frustration to the associated questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006:132&138-139). Extra care must be demonstrated regarding sensitive or personal data, and it may be best to follow an indirect approach than a direct question for such topics (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003:430-432). Without having to know all aspects of the interviewee's culture, it is best to keep a neutral position not only with opinions but also with expressions and adjectives (Gilbert, 2008:262). Having a specified and culturally non-sensitive topic for discussion helps to get sooner to the deeper meanings associated with the research questions (Bryman, 2012:501&503; Morgan, 2004:267). It is true that the more we move away from traditional formalities towards more open forms of contact, the more the quality of meaning and the scope of data collection extend. Eye contact and interpretation of the non-verbal gestures of participants are also required during face-to-face interviews. It makes sense that the interviewer has to use his or her judgement throughout the process about which of those elements to consider important indicators to pursue more detailed information. Meanwhile, he or she has to retain the required level of discretion (especially with elite participants) and avoid gestures of excess intimacy (Bray, 2008: 314).

3.2.3 Supporting the analysis with social media content

Analysing media content is an established method for the collection and analysis of text-related data which historically started with quantitative measures of newspaper material and expanded with the emergence of mass media (radio, TV) towards the measurement of representations, attitudes, symbols, values and codes transmitted through the news (Krippendorff, 2004:5-7). The prerequisite of 'quantifiable objectivity' comes from the many scholars who believed that content resides inside text and that meanings are statistical accounts of the text messages. The increased reliance upon computers for word analysis has supported the quantitative nature of the traditional content analysis (ibid:18-20). The extensive use of the method in disciplines like psychology, history, linguistics, etc. for the measurement of repetitive behavioural codes formulated its typical quantitative character (ibid:11-13). Today this character is under contemporary criticism from various scholars because textual data is viewed as by-default qualitative even when presented in numerical forms. Qualitative approaches focusing on social constructions and aiming to understand how reality is perceived among human interactions become more and more popular. These (so-called) interpretive approaches include some critically decomposing mechanisms that may be foreign to positivist understandings (ibid:16-17).

The importance and increasing influence of qualitative approaches are especially recognised in political analysis and in issues which require analytical inferences. In fact, qualitative textual approaches are considered compatible with content analysis' (ibid:21&89). Even in the more traditional approaches (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969), the method is considered useful to specify intentions and behavioural features of communication participants related to attitudes, interests and values as well as to make inferences related to the consequences and effects of political communication (Krippendorff, 2004:46). Texts and narratives should not be viewed as collections of words but as representations of relationships, morals, ideas and opinions, especially in the case of interactions where the participants discuss topics of social interest. This analysis is more likely to succeed when it focuses upon facts linguistically connected to peoples' beliefs, views, social relationships and public behaviours which reflect issues of social importance or participation in public and political affairs (ibid:63&76-77). Thus,

the analysis becomes very useful for conversational exchanges among political representatives, where the power relationships and dynamics differ among the engaging stakeholders (ibid:68).

In parallel with the primary method of semi-structured interviews, this study utilises a qualitative evaluation of social media content as a support method. Its methodological contribution derives from applying a type of discourse analysis which is not as frequently used in political research as the traditional quantitative content analysis. To successfully define traditional content analysis, one should think of a scientific method which extracts meaning from textual references with the qualities of reliability, replicability and validity stemming from a rather positivist epistemological terminology (Drisko & Maschi, 2015:92). The qualitative analysis of social media content is more common to anthropological and health-related disciplines (nursing, psychology, etc.) which require insightful sense-making rather than the measuring of text qualities. As this study's aims are similarly qualitative, several fundamental principles constitute the qualitative analysis of content as more adequate for the requirements of this study. The use of this qualitative analysis is consistent with the principle of triangulation which as Davies says is very applicable because it allows for multiple sources of data to be used while it enriches the research with the deepening of the findings (Davies, 2001:73). Eisenhardt also encourages the use of multiple data collection methods as a means to substantiate better the meanings and the findings (Eisenhardt, 1989: 538). Interpretive scholars view the text as open-ended and re-definable in terms of meaning, and often more research questions arise as the content is further analysed. By having a good idea of the interviewed MEP's online footprint before each interview, it became easier to enrich the conversation with more questions. In this respect, analysing social media content has been used as a developmental tool as well as a verification method (Flick, 2009:88).

The internet provides instant access to discussions and negotiations from an array of geographically dispersed actors, through the creation of virtual communities. The collection of interactive content from these communities reveals the effects and dynamics of the actors' behaviour more than focusing on the classification of single messages/posts from individual cases (Drisko & Maschi, 2015:73). With the growth of digital text, electronic publications, news feeds and social media exchanges, content

analysis was embraced by the development of computer-based solutions. As the internet expands incorporating more and more electronically available text, the importance of analysing social media content increases because it can respond to an increasing volume of online data. With more people accessing information online, tools for monitoring, translating and analysing digital data are in high demand too (ibid:15&43). This type of analysis is used as a technique to enhance meaningful inferences about the extent and type of interactions among the specified sample of MEPs. The inductive character of the study aiming at theory building is compatible with the use of social media content as a support mechanism rather than the sole method designed to answer the research questions. The verification of MEPs' claims by inspecting their social media footprint, is not trying to quantify their behaviour for comparative purposes, but to enhance the importance of the accumulated findings, primarily since prior work in the field (as demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2) has mostly been focusing on measuring the frequency, quantity and statistical significance of online interactions. Consequently, there is a parallel need to collect primary data from the source (the MEPs) as well as supportive historical data of the MEPs' imprint in the social media arena.

The evaluation of social media content is a supportive method complementary to that of semi-structured interviews. As Yin suggests, this is not a study that can rely on a single method because its subjective character requires more sources of evidence (Yin 2003:4). By using more than one sources (interviews and social media content) the understanding becomes more rooted and thorough (Olsen, 2004). Bryman implies that when two or more methods are used, one prevails as dominant and the others become auxiliary (Bryman, 1988:128). In this study, the social media analysis of content is secondary. From the two major SMPs currently used by the MEPs, Twitter has been chosen for the collection of content like a case study for the evaluation of the claims of the MEPs during the interview stage. There have been claims about the character of Twitter as 'more professional', with greater 'formality', being 'thematically focused', involving a 'wider variety of actors', being 'less family & friends oriented'.

Most importantly, Twitter has undoubtedly the most synchronous and timely character, which requires most of the time, the MEPs' personal involvement. Despite the drawback

of ‘noise’ and a large number of internet ‘trolls’ who demonstrate malignant behaviour, discouraging constituents from interacting, Twitter was also preferred because the volume of collected content (due to word limit restrictions) is more manageable for qualitative analysis without using sophisticated software which would impose inferences of more quantitative nature. The case study approach works by focusing on a particular phenomenon which the researcher hopes that will bring generalisations about the social world. Using Twitter as a case study for MEP online behaviour allows for the more in-depth study of the phenomenon in multiple levels of focus. As Yin suggests, using a case study is particularly helpful when there are more than one sources of data (interviews, SM content) because the focus given on a single case helps to address complex causation and develop better theoretical explanations (Yin, 2009: 18). On the other hand, a series of scholars think that the outcomes of case studies are probabilistic based upon the specific circumstances under which they are analysed, producing tentative generalisations (Gerring, 2004:345&349; George & Bennett, 2005:19&25). With these in mind and after receiving comments from the MEPs during the interview stage, the analysis of social media content focuses upon tweets rather than Facebook posts.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The description of their practical application accompanies the theoretical concerns presented in the previous paragraph about the epistemological and methodological design of the study. In this paragraph, there is an analytical presentation of the processes of data collection and data analysis with emphasis on sampling, timeframe and participant choices, the administration and execution of the interviews and the collection and analysis of tweets.

3.3.1 Sampling, timeframes and filtering

One of the critical decisions associated with this study was to design a framework that would engage representatives from more than one EU member states. For the purposes of this study, the chosen states are Greece, Cyprus and Ireland. Each of these three

states has undergone a multifaceted crisis, mostly economic, which in some instances turned into an identity crisis threatening their further integration in the EU structure. As a result of the financial crisis of 2008, all of these states sooner or later were obliged to adopt austerity policies and budget cuts which affected the revenue and the overall quality of life of their citizens. This imposed a negative impact on the citizens' attitudes towards the EU and especially the EP (Fraile & Di Mauro, 2010:3-4). By analysing from different country-samples of MEPs the process and content of online interactions with the constituents, we reveal the general insight of their intentions and motivations in an online environment which is overwhelmed by discourse related to the crisis.[11] This helps to clarify if there is validity to the argument that social media is an alternative method for political participation. The interview responses collected from Greek, Irish and Cypriot MEPs, help to establish how this perception is treated based on electoral traditions, constituency features, historical-political-cultural differences or generic stance towards EU integration. In EU politics, values and beliefs about national priorities may differ between member states. Cultural differences can jeopardise the analysis if the data drawn for inferences and comparisons are not adequately chosen (May, 2011:53). These inferences would not have emerged from a single-country sample.

Distinct national characteristics or different approaches to the same topic/issue/policy can affect the online broadcasts and the overall communication between MEPs and the public. Concerning historical and cultural differences, Ireland is closer to the so-called 'European North', as opposed to Greece and Cyprus which belong to the 'European South'. Nevertheless, the three states are all 'small' sized peripheral economies which were inflicted upon by the financial crisis and required the intervention of EU mechanisms in a spirit of EU solidarity, to avoid bankruptcy and remain economically viable. Therefore, the North-South division which has been vigorously debated, as a feature which influences how the Northern states (with industrial background) and the Southern states (with agricultural background), view and pursue policy-making, may not apply to Greece, Cyprus and Ireland after the outbreak of the financial crisis.[12] Moreover,

[11] It should be noted that although the selection of the particular states upon which to focus the study was mainly instigated by the common parameter of the crisis, it was also substantially accommodated by language considerations given the researcher's bilingual proficiency in both Greek (native speaker) and English.

[12] For some more information visit http://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/ei-blog/155-european-affairs/ea-august-2012/1614-europes-north-south-dividea-stubborn-chasm,

the three states have always been pro-European and participated in further integration by becoming members of the Eurozone.

The financial/debt crisis imposed social unrest in the three states at different times and social media was until recently congested with conflicting views about the success of austerity policies imposed by EU authorities and debates about the benefits of exiting the common currency and in some cases the EU itself.[13] The constituents created with their SMP interventions online narratives of the crisis while requesting from the MEPs to take a clear position regarding the opposing arguments favouring further or less EU integration. As this study is not comparative among the different populations of MEPs from Cyprus, Ireland and Greece, the participants' sample is viewed and examined as one unified sample of MEPs from crisis-inflicted EU states. For social media content collection purposes, the sample includes only the MEPs from these states who had previously been interviewed. About the focus of the study on routine timeframe political behaviour in SMPs, this comes as a result of the critical literature review (chapters 1-2) which indicated that most of the existing research about the use of SMPs refers to electoral campaigning either for individual candidates or parties. However, the MEPs are not using SMPs only once every five years, and in fact, most of their involvement in SMPs refers to non-campaigning activities.

In order to collect the wealth of relevant tweets, a non-manual process based on the use of software was chosen. The use of a software tool was preferred over the manual collection, to avoid human-error (omitting critical tweets) and to achieve a timely and accurate collection of all exciting dialogues. The software applications which are focused on SM content collections are nowadays quite popular and widely used among scholars researching SM content.[14] Studying MEPs from different nations, required the use of an application which could fulfil the queries and searches of tweets written in two different

https://piie.com/commentary/op-eds/north-south-divide-euro-area, https://realtruth.org/articles/110718-005-europe.html

[13] Some examples of relevant arguments at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2959339/I-m-increasingly-certain-Greece-leave-euro-best-Britain-says-MEP-DANIEL-HANNAN.html , http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2015/08/03/817326/greek-mep-warns-of-catastrophic-effects-of-grexit , http://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/grexit-divides-politicians-in-athens/

[14] A few examples related to academic-related (non-market) solutions are: Cosmos available at https://www.cs.cf.ac.uk/cosmos/, QCamap available at http://www.qualitative-content-analysis.aau.at/software/ and Chorus available at http://chorusanalytics.co.uk/

languages (English and Greek). This was addressed by using the online platform Monitor[15] developed from the Greek software company Sidebar[16]. Monitor can conduct advanced searches based upon keywords or names almost in all existing popular SMPs in both languages. Free complimentary access to the platform was provided from Sidebar for the explicit purpose of this research. To complement and verify the collection of SM content, another tool named N-Capture (for N-Vivo) was also used; therefore the tweet collections were extracted twice before filters were applied to them to determine the final data samples.

The process of sampling in the case of social media content presents particular challenges. In contrast with people or objects, text cannot be considered on its own right as something individually countable because it must be chosen with reference to the information and meaning that it incorporates and how it helps to answer the research question. The text must also be chosen so that it remains informative without any bias towards specific results (Krippendorff, 2004:113). For this research, a mixture of sampling methods was addressed. The aim was to choose tweets that contribute to determining the type and themes of online interactions between MEPs and constituents. There are three chosen populations which correspond to the MEPs who agreed to participate in the research by giving an interview first. From the twenty-one elected Greek MEPs, there are twelve interviewed participants owning Twitter accounts (one of them had activated but was not using the account while the study was conducted). From the eleven elected Irish MEPs, there are six interviewed participants, and all of them own and use a Twitter account. All of the six elected Cypriot MEPs participated in the research while owning a Twitter account (one of them had an inactive while the study was conducted). [17] The online content produced by the previous population was sampled by using relevance sampling techniques. This means that an examination of the actual tweets took place before deciding if they should be included in the sample. The resulting units for analysis are not a representative portion of the population; they are the entire population of interactions relevant to the topic of research. This is not a probabilistic method and differs from the way statistical sampling operates. This type of

[15] For details see https://monitor.innews.gr/
[16] Sidebar was absorbed in 2018 by the company Innews . For details see https://www.innews.gr/
[17] For details see http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home and then use the name of the country for a list of the MEPs pages with their personal contact information.

sampling is also a census because the sample for analysis contains all of the relevant to analysis dialogues without exclusions (Krippendorff, 2004:119-120).

The sample was further defined according to search criteria based upon the tweets posted in the MEPs official accounts either by them or by their followers in the public Twitter-domain. Meanwhile, the empirical evidence for the social media behaviour of campaigning politicians has been so far produced by analysing hashtags although candidates are only one of many participants in hashtag themes (Small, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2011). In this case, the content was categorised according to meaning rather than according to keywords and sentiments because the study focuses upon interactions which explicitly refer to the three themes of accountability, policy discussion and branding. Accountability-related tweets are those which usually stem from the MEPs providing detailed information about their EP related activities-choices-votes-reports-questions-committee work. Policy discussion is defined here as a situation where tweeting goes beyond the publication of a single comment or question at the MEP's public account. To be defined as a policy discussion, a Twitter-interaction will have to incorporate at least a two-directional exchange of discourse in the form of a reply to an initiated approach. This requires types of response which constitute a form of a conversation between the MEPs and the constituents. Otherwise, individual tweets that refer to policies/views/positions are mere policy broadcasts or policy references. The intention was to capture as many interactions as possible in order to determine how extensive the online discussion function is. If the boundaries of tweet collection expand to policy references with no discussion element, then a false effect might be established. On the other hand, if the focus becomes too narrow, then the number of dialogues might be too small to justify the discussion argument.

3.3.2 Organising and conducting interviews

To reveal and interpret perceptions of online motivation and behaviour, the researcher designed a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the chosen MEPs. The potential participants were not hard to be identified and contacted due to the public nature of their positions and the available information online (Vromen, 2010:258). Convincing the MEPs to participate by allocating their scarce time, overcoming the

limitations of accessibility and the possibility of reluctance over their exposure, were some of the anticipated methodological problems (Flick, 2009:168). In preparation for the interviews, an Interview Request Letter was forwarded to all thirty-eight incumbent MEPs from Cyprus, Ireland and Greece explaining the research and the reasons for the request. The Interview Request Letter outlined the purpose of the interview as a method of data collection and was accompanied by a detailed Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form[18]. The Participant Information Sheet emphasised on the thesis' aim and scope and the value of the anticipating research results for both the public and the MEPs (advantages for participating). It also offered assurances as to the use of the data (confidentiality), the way the data would be handled (storage and anonymity) and the participants' right to withdraw at any moment. The potential participants were given written assurance before offering their consent that their rights to anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal would be preserved throughout the process. The MEPs who eventually took part in the interviews provided their written consent and requested that the information and comments provided would be anonymised due to the nature of their answers which could affect their relations with fellow MEPs (Goldstein, 2002: 671).

For the MEPs who positively replied to the interview request and returned the signed Consent Form, convenient dates/locations were discussed and in some instances actively negotiated. The necessary arrangements were finalised via email and telephone contacts with the associates of the MEPs. An effort was given to facilitate the busy schedule of the MEPs with the capacity to travel. Once an interview date was set, after the signed Consent Form had been returned, a Verification Letter incorporating a draft set of indicative discussion themes, together with a draft interview schedule was forwarded to each participant allowing them to familiarise with the interview theme and process, without losing the required degree of independence during the face-to-face interactions. An Interview Debriefing Information Sheet was also prepared to be handed to participants at the end of each interview, offering information on the research questions, the research methods and the anticipated findings. Appendix V contains an indicative list of open-end themes which were used during the interviews, not

[18] Please see Appendix II & III for samples of those documents

necessarily in that specific order, form or quantity. A list of anonymised MEPs and the date of their interview is also provided in Appendix IV.

The conduct of semi-structured interviews with selected MEPs aims to reveal their real intentions and the way they interpret their online communication with the constituents. Most importantly, to determine the logic behind the adoption of a particular interactive behaviour and how this is related to their understanding of their representation role in combination with their inherent tendency to brand themselves under a particular political profile. It is their power position and expert knowledge of EU policies in comparison to the constituents, which generates research interest when they are viewed under the prism of their quality of being political entities seeking re-election. A qualitative micro-level interpretive methodology for these critical stakeholders (MEPs) has been qualified as a method to expose meanings, views and underlying assumptions not directly identified in their public discourse. It has been a matter of the interpretive ability of the interviewer to spot those meanings in a widened scope of data collection. The limitations imposed by MEPs' availability as well as the power relations between the MEPs and the researcher, constitute semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate technique. The face-to-face interviews incorporated questions designed to surface views and meanings which may not have been directly exposed in the MEPs' social media accounts. The challenge was to avoid answers architected by the MEPs (what constituents want to hear) which are related to the stress for social desirability, i.e. the anxiety of the interviewee to be accepted by his or her audience. The interviews with the MEPs were conducted based on a set of themes that allowed for an open discussion. As a result, findings and data which were not anticipated emerged, imposing the use of additional questions which revealed new dimensions of the topic.

Of the approached MEPs, twenty-six responded positively. Eventually, it was feasible to conduct interviews with twenty-four of them between July 2016 and July 2017. Two of the MEPs cancelled the arranged interview after their initial acceptance. In one case, the interview was cancelled on the day of the meeting in Brussels, and the MEP agreed to provide answers via an exchange of emails. Most of the interviews took place either in the MEPs' premises in Brussels or in some limited cases via Skype and telephone. Travelling abroad proved essential for a coherent data collection related to MEPs'

intrinsic interest in networking online with the constituents. The priorities set for this study as well as administrative, organisational, time-related and facilitation factors, required that data collection had to take place in MEPs' natural surroundings. There was no need for special arrangements or facilities for the MEPs as the interviews took place in their familiar environment. No safeguarding was necessary either, as the locations of the interviews were adequately maintained. Particular caution was given not to allow any intimidation or influence from the elite character of the environment (EP). In order to collect primary data from MEPs via interviews, three Greek MEPs were interviewed during July 2016 in their offices in Athens-Greece. Then a research trip was conducted to Brussels-Belgium during September 2016 focusing on collecting data from all the different national samples of MEPs (Greek, Cypriot and Irish) with a total of eleven interviews. A short trip to Brussels took place in July 2017 for the three final interviews. The face-to-face interviews were accompanied by eight skype/telephone interviews, which were conducted with the MEPs who could not commit to a specific interview date due to their heavy workload. As a result, two-thirds of the total number of interviews were face-to-face. The total amount of interviews (24) refers to almost 65% of the total 'under examination' population (38 elected MEPs) for Greece, Cyprus and Ireland and it is considered to represent a saturation point for the interview method. The average length of the interviews was 41 minutes (ranging from 26 minutes the shortest to 65 minutes the longest). In contrast to theoretical claims (see 3.2.2) about the duration of telephone interviews, from the total of the twenty-four executed interviews, those conducted through the telephone were on average the more lengthy ones. The explanation is that this is probably because the MEPs had chosen to communicate via telephone on instances when they had more free time and fewer EP activities to attend.

The design of a coherent and informative set of questions was a task of vital importance as this was the research technique used to gain insight into the MEPs' perceptions and intentions. As the purpose of the interviews was to reveal naturally spontaneous or deeply-rooted views with no prior preparation or manipulation, the questions asked were not part of a predetermined communicated questionnaire. Although there were always some common questions that were bound to be addressed in almost all the interviews, in practice the amount and type of questions asked were determined by the way the conversation developed and the ability of each MEP to be concise, informative

and data-generating. An effort was given to keep the questions flexible and open-end to avoid limiting the MEPs responses and a rough question-guide which was prepared before the interview was used. Whenever deviations from the themes occurred, the conversation was directed back on track with discretion (Burns, 2000: 425; Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 4). Also, the availability of time from each MEP's side was a parameter defining to a large extent, the depth of each interview and the prioritisation of topics that had to be addressed. Further to this there is always the possibility that the MEPs might be obliged to interrupt the interview at any time to attend other matters and in fact, this happened twice during the telephone interviews, thankfully without affecting the quality of the collected data (Leech, 2002: 666; Burnham et al., 2008: 240). All of the interview sessions were recorded with the permission of the MEPs (Burnham et al., 2008: 239). During the interviews, shorthand notes were taken about the conversation, the MEPs' gestures, expressions, facial and body language, the things they were saying and most importantly the things they implied without mentioning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:30; Burnham et al., 2008:241). In the end, the MEPs produced a wealth of findings which were taxonomised by using the concepts of accountability, policy discussion and branding. The groups of motivations and activities reported by the MEPs sometimes overlapped and the same activity can be described by more than one concepts. This is adding wealth and depth to the findings more than complexity as it can be seen in the next few chapters (especially chapters 5, 6 and 7).

3.3.3 Collection and analysis of tweets

A period with no electoral or campaigning events which would inflict bias to the relevant online interactions was chosen for inquiry and content collection purposes. The reason for choosing a routine timeframe for the national samples was to avoid the bias of campaigning activities which are bound to affect the behaviour of the MEPs towards advertising and marketing priorities. For the Greek MEPs, one day after the last General Election (20/9/2015) provides the earliest possible date for data collection (end of the electoral campaigning period). For Ireland which had a general election at a later date in 2016, it is the dissolving of the Dail on 3/2/2016 (start of official electoral campaigning period) before the National Election of 26/2/2016. Cyprus had no electoral timeframes during this period. Since no other electoral events have occurred within this period a

timeframe rule is defined which sets a specific tweet-collection period of reference, clear of electoral or campaigning biases. This timeframe is equal to 134 days or roughly 4.5 months, from 21 September 2015 to 2 February 2016. It must be noted that the collected tweets are those published in the official accounts of the MEPs, not the tweets that were posted in constituents' accounts mentioning the MEPs. It is the use of the SMPs by the MEPs that intrigues this study, not the overall MEP-related political 'traffic' in social media.

For the SM content collection phase in this study, Twitter Inc. was contacted via email and permission for the collection and analysis of Tweets was requested with a Request Letter. Although the MEPs' data is publicly accessible online, Twitter Inc. was contacted to provide the formal framework of the rules and conditions of content collection. The company replied with a citation to their Terms of Use indicating that collecting tweets was feasible as long as these terms were not breached. After this process of formality, the accounts of the chosen MEPs were accessed, and the online interactions with their constituents were collected in accordance with Twitter Inc. Terms & Conditions. Before using the chosen software tools for the filtering of Twitter content (Monitor and N-Capture), I took into account the acceptable procedures and authorisations, which are described in the University of Hull Code of Practice and the Faculty of Business, Law and Politics Ethics Procedures, the Twitter Terms of Service and the Twitter Privacy Policy. Coding, analysis and relevant produced inferences of the Twitter content emerged either manually or with the use of the previously mentioned software or by using other appropriate applications like N-Vivo which were provided by the University of Hull under authorisation and official user licences.

The collection of the tweets followed the necessary steps prescribed by the relevant applications, and the tweets were grouped and stored per MEP. Distinguishing content that is most relevant to the study, limiting observations upon conceptually representative samples, coding the content as analysable representations, creating inferences on the meaning and presenting the results as a comprehensible narration, are all components of the analysis cycle which were used for the purposes of the study (Drisko & Maschi, 2015:83-85). The analysis of the tweets followed the basic rules of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is an analytical approach to speech, text and

symbols which examines the social constructions of groups or individuals and a helpful strategy to uncover representations and interpretations of reality (Jacobs, 2006:138; Bryman, 2001:360). To analyse the collected content, a thematic approach was used based on the three distinct MEP functions, accountability, policy discussion and branding and after the initial grouping, sub-themes of similar value were distinguished (Matthews & Ross, 2010:373-374). The groupings of similar online 'behaviours' form expressions of the motivations and the strategies of the MEPs as described in chapters 5-6-7 of the Thesis. The breaking down of Themes (AC-PD-BR) → Motivations/Strategies → Online Activities is offering a clear imprint of the MEPs' historical behaviour.

A useful note at this point is about a series of definitions which will help to identify the differences in some categories of collected data. The collected tweets are distributed among three distinct interactivity modes which are defined as 'Broadcasting', 'Interacting' and 'Discussing'. 'Broadcasting' is the mode that refers to a single tweet published in an MEP's account which stems either from the MEP or a constituent and remains standalone, i.e. receives no reply or comment. 'Interacting' involves the transmission of feedback from one counterpart to the other with no further elaboration of the topic. Finally, the 'Discussion' mode is defined as a situation where tweeting among the two parts extends beyond the previous mode of 2-3 tweets and has the potential for further elaboration.

It should also be noted that the analysis of historical content collected from the social media accounts of the interviewed MEPs are offering an understanding of their actual behaviour and an extension to the claims expressed during the interview stage. This content is not capable of offering explanatory insight as to why these activities were preferred over others. This is a parameter that remains attached to the inner perception of the MEPs and is more appropriately addressed by the findings of the interviews. This is an additional reason why the analysis of social media content is a supportive method with interviews remaining the primary method used in this study. However, the two methods combined provide a deep insight into the MEPs' perspective of online representation. May it also be noted that the collection of tweets was not categorised with regard to the gender of the MEPs because representative democracy distributes

both obligations and rights equally to citizens regardless of being male, female or transgender.

3.4 Research ethics and integrity

This study has received Ethical Considerations Approval from the University of Hull Politics, Philosophy and International Studies Ethics Committee. The study adheres to the University of Hull Code Of Practice, the Faculty Ethics Procedures and the University of Hull Statement on Research Integrity for all of its aspects (methodology, sampling-recruitment-briefing of participants, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, data management-storage-security-backup, confidentiality-anonymity-withdrawal, use-publication of results).

Ethical considerations are an essential feature of any research, and as May suggests, life experiences and value judgements are inevitably present during the process of qualitative research (May, 2001:50). The researchers eventually collect data that may or may not fit their or the society's views, desires or set values in relation to the topic. Thus a question arises as to whether a separation between what 'is' (fact) and what 'should be' (value) is desired or feasible. Although the researchers must be careful not to define the products of the research according to personal values, our decisions and actions are shaped from what we know and understand (ibid:47-48 & 57). Our experiences and impressions influence our interpretation of the social world; therefore, the background values of the researcher influence the research data (Hennink et al., 2011:14-15). The values of the researcher affect the aspects of the project throughout its various stages. Eliminating or detaching them is not a solution because being unbiased is not the same as presenting 'facts without values'; it is to accurately administer values during the research stages towards a credible and acceptable outcome (May, 2011:60-61; Baarts, 2009:431-432). As Pinker states, the researcher must be careful not to define the products of the research according to personal values; it may be acceptable to have a specific standpoint and the willingness to influence change but not to impose the desired kind of change through the findings (Pinker, 1971:130). As Weber (quoted in May, 2011) suggests, empirical facts are one thing, and the evaluation of these by the

researcher is another. People should not be told what to think before they can assess the results on their own (May, 2011:57).

The methodological choices related to this study, especially those involving the interviewing of MEPs, obliged the researcher to be highly involved with the research process and the generated data. Having an interpretation of the social world means that there can be no detachment from the MEPs and their views. Reflexivity was a vital requirement which helped to re-evaluate roles with flexibility and sensitive manner (Mason, 2002:7; Bryman, 2012:393-394). Throughout the different stages of the research process (design, application, analysis and dissemination) as distinguished by van Deventer, consideration has been given to the ethical issues that arise when a project involves human beings (in contrast to objects) (van Deventer, 2009:45). Such issues relate to the safety of participants and the public, the clarity of provided information, the general good of the society and the overall justification of the research (ibid:48). 'Informed consent' is an essential aspect of the ethical standpoint and the researched participants must always agree to freely take part in the research and not because they are imposed to do so (ibid:48; Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001:359; Bryman, 2012:138-139). All participating MEPs have voluntarily provided their informed consent before their interview. Before freely participating, the MEPs became fully aware of the scope, aims, processes and consequences of the study and were allowed to express their reservation or disapproval at any stage of their participation. Furthermore, the MEPs were given the option to withdraw from the study and also the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality (May, 2011:62-63; Flick, 2009:41). In this respect, all relevant communicational issues were addressed during the design and implementation of the study (request of access, sampling, disclosure, etc.) (van Deventer, 2009:50). By signing the Consent Form, participants agreed that the collected data and produced results could be used for research purposes and may be published in scientific and academic journals (including online publications), conferences, non-academic publications and media in general.

The issue that May calls 'unintended consequence' refers to the use of the research results for purposes foreign to the researcher's intention (May, 2011:56). Therefore, an effort has been given to ensure that there is no bias related to specific interests (e.g.

related to the MEPs, their parties or other social groups) or the will to exploit the research results to support arguments in favour or against citizen participation via SM. Another vital feature of studies related to policy experts or political elites is that the distribution of power among the involved stakeholders (MEPs vs constituents) may be unequal. This can become problematic for the research approach, and it may require different techniques to be applied (ibid:55). To research the members of an elite (MEPs) while being a citizen means that the researcher acts from an inferior power position. Intimidation has to be avoided at all costs, and the researcher must ensure a solid objective standpoint. Objectivity and integrity were vital elements of the data analysis, especially for data collected during MEP interviewing, which are considered vital for revealing personal insights that must be appropriately interpreted (van Deventer, 2009:53). The collected data were treated according to the ethical principles without the intention of controlling their analysis and presentation. Any manipulation of the methodological tools to achieve specific results constitutes unethical behaviour, and that has been avoided at all costs (May, 2011:64-65).

The critical issue of data storage has been dealt with adequately. Research data need to be organised in a systematic way to be identifiable and accessible for research purposes with safety. It must be stored securely, backed up and maintained regularly taking into account the two main aspects of data security, i.e. the issues of confidentiality and data corruption or loss. For this study, storage capacity was considered and secured, and access permission was restricted only to the researcher. Hard-copy material was securely stored in locked cabinets within University premises with the original data always stored in a secure University location. All collected, produced, analysed data were safely stored in digital and hard-copy mediums and preserved for the duration of the study on University terminals and Networked Drives. Networked drives were managed by IT staff centrally and were regularly backed-up minimising the risk of loss, theft or unauthorised use. Whenever specialised software for the analysis of data (N-Vivo, Monitor) was used, research-related information was also kept in the form of processed files. Confidentiality relates to security measures against human interference and securing digital research data is part of information technology security. In this respect, all data covered by confidentiality agreements were encrypted. The current study did not handle sensitive data, which could jeopardise the physical or social status

of the participants. Therefore there was no foreseeable need for the physical destruction of records, files and notes. The Consent Form given to the participating MEPs made explicit reference to the disposal of data. If a need for disposal arises in the future, then data wiping and physical destruction through disintegration or shredding for hard-copy material will take place.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented in detail the research approach for data collection and analysis and the assumptions underlying the design of the methodological framework. Based on the interpretive paradigm, the thesis uses an inductive methodology to answer questions about the perceptions of the MEPs on the value and use of SMPs. The use of semi-structured interviews and supportive analysis of content from Twitter are chosen for the purpose of data collection. The chapter ends by clarifying how all the ethical requirements have been approved prior to the commencement of the study.

CHAPTER 4 – THE LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

4.1 Introduction

As described in the previous chapters, the conditions that apply to the environment of the contemporary SMPs in the crisis-inflicted states are dictated by the influence of a disassociated and pessimistic audience, which is fragmented, disorganised and further alienated by the infliction of austerity measures which were introduced as a therapy to the financial crisis. This internal crisis was accompanied by externally-driven crises like the inflow of refugees and the border crisis, which escalated the effect. The aftermath of these crises was that among the people, the demand for sentiment expression became strong. The need made a breakthrough via SMPs and eventually escalated to online behaviours, which generated overwhelming noise and abuse towards the political representatives. In this 'toxic' scenery, the MEPs had to overcome their limitations while at the same time, they needed to surpass the flaws of the SMPs and communicate with their constituents. This unfortunate mix questions the MEPs' motivation and generates the need to interpret their online behaviour within an environment which is, at first sight, discouraging for political communication. For the benefit of better understanding, the landscape is examined from two perspectives: the external and the internal. The interviewed MEPs were asked to define parameters which they believed that affected their capacity to communicate online. They provided features which refer to the SMPs and their distinct characteristics as well as features which have affected political communication regardless of the SMPs.

4.2 External parameters

In this paragraph, the focus is on external parameters and how they affect what happens in the virtual arena. The influence of the crises, Euroscepticism, public sphere fragmentation, variety of electoral systems, MEP resources and internal EP processes were the most prevalent external parameters which affect behaviours and discourse in the SMPs.

4.2.1 Crisis and platform discourse

In a time of austerity, it is normal for constituents to prioritise their welfare among their needs. As MEP16 states, constituents are mostly interested in their wellbeing. Thus they always prioritise the quest for a stable revenue, good healthcare and education for their children. In that respect, the economic crisis has been a factor which further increased the gap between the MEPs and their constituents. The layers of the population which are harder inflicted by the crisis, find it convenient as MEP20 suggests, to blame the politicians, and this is further opening the distance from the representatives. As a result, people online find it easier to express disappointment and anger, rather than calmly discuss EU politics and how they affect their lives. For the time being, due to the crisis aftermath, constituents are generally unwilling to pay any attention to other political issues.

> 'People's priority today is to endure austerity and the economic crisis, not to discuss the content of European policies. Only if we can persuade that our work as MEPs contributes to the provision of vital goods, citizens will engage with politics again'. MEP20, 07/06/2017.

As MEP13 suggests, constituents online prefer to engage in topics that are directly affecting them and express their determination to resist and fight for their 'rights'. To MEP16, this is why there has been a significant change in the amount and quality of public engagement, observing a shift in the topics of interest. He/she is receiving approaches by constituents who have been inflicted by austerity measures, and these constituents' interactions are overwhelmed by sentiment, failing to provide any practical suggestions. MEP11 is convinced that constituents are still not ready to engage productively with the MEPs, because of their emotional status after dealing with the crisis consequences. It is challenging to recognise whether they access SMPs because they want to engage or because they want to diffuse their rage.

> 'In most cases, the constituents want to comment on issues related to their wellbeing, but their online presence is short, intense and fragmented'.
> MEP11, 06/09/2016

As a result of this intensified disassociation due to the economic crisis, MEP8 has not yet received any genuine interest from constituents to discuss the European policies online.

MEPs 7, 8, 12 and 17 further highlight the general quality deterioration in the political climate of the crisis-inflicted societies. The economic crisis has made it very hard for the public to associate their everyday life with the work that takes place in Brussels. The constituents only know that harsh decisions are taken for them 'elsewhere' and this frustrates them further. Constituents' priority is on issues like unemployment, debts, wage cuts and the drop of their quality of life, but they never associate these issues with the nature of the decisions taken at the EU level. How could they, MEP17 wonders, when the countries in crisis are undergoing a permanent electoral campaigning period with spirits that are always aggressive, affecting the quality of public dialogue? Instead of thinking about the best policies for the people, both the government and the opposition spend their time and energy to inflict harm to one another.

> 'The instability of the political system in the crisis-inflicted countries draws the constituents in a state of permanent political tension. Inevitably this affects the way I receive and use constituents' feedback'.
>
> MEP17, 11/05/2017

To MEP7, it is not the platforms that make the difference in the quality of online contributions; it is the general climate in society. He/she estimates that the current economic and social environment (and consequently the political environment) is toxic and it will probably remain like this for some time in the future. The financial crisis and the austerity measures have increased the feeling of aggression among inflicted citizens. Because of this, there is a lack of composure, and every difference of opinion turns to a confrontation, which reduces the opportunities for a constructive online dialogue. In fact, during and after the crisis, MEP7 feels that the political discussion has been rapidly turning from the exchange of written arguments and positions to the exchange of quotes of impression or disclaimers.

> 'Political communication is regressing to a system of vertical confrontation. I foresee that like in the middle-ages, a type of religious consciousness will prevail, which will divide the citizens according to their views among orthodox, infidels and heretics. If this becomes the mainstream, then in the long-term, the quality of political debates will further downgrade drifting the principles and institutions of representation'. MEP7, 05/09/2016

MEP12 adds that in the more developed EU countries, the constituents have accepted the consolidated political system as default, while in the crisis-inflicted countries

(especially those of the European South) the political system has not yet found its balance.

> 'The historical, political and cultural fundamentals have not yet found ground to construct routed political principles, and this leaves room to populist alternatives which develop and corrode the system. As a result, even the most fundamental of ideas need to be analysed, and the constituents must be persuaded to follow solutions which in other EU states are taken for granted'. MEP12, 06/09/2016

The MEPs themselves are destined to assume part of the blame for this suspiciousness and lack of trust from the public. As MEP1 reminds, a severe economic crisis can influence choices of extreme policy measures, which lie away from the usual ideological assumptions, blurring the traditional positioning of the parties on the left, centre and right of the political spectrum.

> 'Many politicians, including the MEPs, have swayed back and forth from what was once considered an undisputed ideological or personal position, because of painful but unavoidable practical decision making'. MEP1, 12/07/2016

The inconsistency has not been taken lightly by the public and MEP6 believes that it has probably further worsened the MEPs' public image. Especially some MEPs who were actively involved in governmental decision making, taking decisions during the worst of times for their country, have seen their brand being 'stained'. For many constituents, becoming an MEP after such a controversial period is seen as a form of escaping to Brussels from internal politics and the burden of assuming further responsibilities and painful decision making. In that respect, the role of SMPs during the crisis has been questioned by some MEPs. MEPs 11 & 18 think that SMPs have been widely exploited during the time of economic crisis in a twofold way; they have been used to influence or terrorise the masses towards accepting austerity and a series of unjust or bound-to-fail measures, and on the other hand, they have also been used to organise social movements and protests. On a more individualised level, constituents used SMPs to request assistance or support, turning the platforms into negotiating channels. As more aspects of the crisis were exposed, the crisis emerged as a topic online, and constituents have been participating with their positive or negative views and suggestions, about the measures which were imposed. One cannot expect an economic crisis to be overcome only with SMPs, but when people's voices are heard loud during the critical hours, this

can be influential to those who take the painful practical decisions. MEP1 also acknowledges that in times of crisis, SMPs can be useful tools for the collection of public opinion in order to understand what the average constituent wants.

4.2.2 Euroscepticism, fragmentation and disengagement

The interviewed MEPs have formulated a general view about the level of interest of their constituents about European politics, which is not far from the descriptions found in the relevant literature about the general attitude of European citizens towards EU policy-making. These descriptions refer to a 'gap' that exists between the disassociated citizens and their representatives. Constituents are generally ignorant of what happens in the EU or the EP and do not realise that some of the significant decisions that affect their wellbeing are taken in Brussels and Strasbourg. This is a statement that most of the MEPs agree with. MEPs 5 & 12 think that constituents are not genuinely interested in initiating a political dialogue. MEP12 tested this argument, by disseminating through the social media accounts a brochure of proposals about how to tackle the economic crisis. No member of the general public expressed the desire to discuss it or criticise it online, offering any recommendations. As MEP5 argues:

> 'To introduce democratic regeneration via the SMPs is a very optimistic task. The public is indifferent overall, and the constituents are more attracted to generalisations and verbal impressions'. MEP5, 06/09/2016.

To support this argument, MEP1 states that the constituents demonstrate an ignorance of the various mechanisms (lobbying, debate process, 1st-2nd reading, party manoeuvring etc.) of European decision making because they only know what they see and hear in the TV news or the press. When it comes to directives, decisions and EU practices, the news bulletins are not the best source, to get an insight into what precedes a final vote.

> 'To most of the constituents I meet online, voting in the EP is an instantaneous and mystic procedure'. MEP1, 12/07/2016

Keeping in mind the influence of traditional media, it makes sense according to MEP17 why the public is more interested in topics of national interest, while the interest demonstrated for EU policies is minimal. The journalists themselves are less interested in covering stories that relate to EU affairs and this further increases the fragmentation

of the European public sphere. Although issues like the TTIP, the de-industrialisation of the European South, the European working rights, zero-hour contracts, etc. affect people's lives, the constituents keep a distance from EU developments.

> 'The interest and the response of the public to the important topics have been small because they look complicated and distant. There has not been much interest in traditional media to cover them, and as a result, the discussion about the crucial issues remains minimal and superficial'.
> MEP17, 11/05/2017

Regarding this fragmentation of the public sphere, MEP9 suggests that before using SMPs for political exchanges, we need to establish a common EU public sphere able to understand the needs of all Europeans. Until the citizens of a member-state can understand the claims and issues that trouble citizens from other EU states, their judgement will be blurred, and this will result in the oversimplification of the problems, which in turn leads to the prevalence of propaganda and distortion.

> 'Without a more centralised direction of the public sphere, constituents will never gain the maturity to engage online with their MEPs productively'.
> MEP9, 06/09/2016

MEP14 is not blaming the EU public for this, because Brussels (the Heads of institutions like the Council, the Commission or the EP) present the EU affairs to the public in a beautified manner and not like they are. MEP8 further blames the existing narrative, explaining that EU citizens feel abandoned because the EU leadership has been proven inconsistent, changing views and directions for the sake of political survival. This loss of credibility and trust affects the MEPs, who have their integrity and consistency questioned both online and offline. Consequently, for MEP8, the public sphere needs a higher level of maturity and quality in the interactions between citizens and representatives before the SMPs can contribute to the political exchanges.

Some MEPs acknowledge the contribution offered by the SMPs as limited and partial. MEP19 thinks that SMPs are useful to explain to the constituents what happens in Brussels and what the MEPs try to achieve, but this alone cannot fix the so-called democratic deficits or the general disassociation of the public. MEP21 feels that there are constituents out there who genuinely wish to access a forum for expression and proposal submission. The social media accounts of the MEPs could be considered as

credible chambers for debates with the MEP or the other participants. In contrast, other MEPs are more pessimistic. MEP16 is convinced that constituents view SMPs only as mediums of practical convenience. They do not care about these mediums as much as they care about the results of political decisions that affect them.

> 'Only when the majority of the public can secure decent conditions of living, the constituents will reconnect with their representatives and the communicational mediums will start to matter more to them'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

Even further, MEP18 disagrees with the claim that citizens cannot participate (directly or indirectly) in the decision-making process of the EU. He/she reminds that collecting one million signatures for the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) is a direct method of participation and that all EU directives have to pass through the national parliaments where the national representatives vote. The views and positions of all the member-states have to be considered before deciding in the EU.

> 'If we also add the SMPs among the various available decision-making initiatives, we may end up with a democratic surplus instead of a democratic deficit. Adding more procedures and layers is a way to strengthen bureaucracy instead of strengthening democracy'. MEP18, 22/05/2017

For several MEPs (6, 8, 9, 18, 22 and 23), the emerging Eurosceptic wave is applying further pressure to the post-crisis landscape, especially when it comes to engaging online with the constituents. In the three researched member states, this is related to fake news, extreme scenarios, conspiracy theories and populist arguments that overwhelm social media, disputing the 'orthodox' approaches of reform and austerity that the EU is applying to end the crisis. The MEPs feel that Euroscepticism is further intensified because the constituents have little if any knowledge of what the MEPs do. There is massive misinformation about the EU institutions and their role. The EP Committees and the Plenary are not disseminating their work adequately to the citizens, who need to search by themselves to discover live coverages of the sessions. The ignorance of the public is reproduced in the SMPs.

> 'The work of the MEPs is not adequately communicated to the public, and many constituents think that we are on a permanent vacation in Brussels'. MEP8, 06/09/2016.

These MEPs also believe that the majority of 'trolling', comes from populist and Eurosceptic supporters who overwhelm the public sphere with noise, trying to bury the message of the mainstream political forces. They claim that the centrist rhetoric may be more technocratic and less idealistic than the radical ones making the populist far left and far right methodology to seem more attractive and appealing to the citizens.

> 'The far left and the far right are so much into social media. They keep constantly supporting each other and turn SMPs into a hater's paradise with those in the centre thinking ''Hey! There is a whole world going around us here''. MEP6, 05/09/2016.

According to these MEPs, the constituents who are negatively prejudiced about the EU issues, are those who generate considerable noise and tension online, hampering those with positive viewpoints from being heard. During the economic crisis, anti-systemic political forces used Twitter and Facebook for the creation of an anti-European movement. The SMPs became overwhelmed by a Eurosceptic discourse which distorted the reality, creating a parallel universe of populist rage.

> 'The rebellious voices tried to influence public opinion against any European solution, promoting Eurosceptic propaganda. They disoriented the public from the real issues and the need for reforms'. MEP9, 06/09/2016.

As MEP18 insists, European citizens do not see the EU as their home that needs to be defended from populism. On the contrary, the EU is accused of most of society's deficiencies, and its democracy features are not highlighted as much as they should. Those who criticise the EU always find willing ears and so far the EU is defenceless and helpless against the waves of populist and radical voices. MEP22 thinks that it is the EU itself which has to fight Euroscepticism by fulfilling its purpose and following its core principles with consistency. He/she mocks the potential of reducing Euroscepticism by using SMPs to bridge the gap between the MEPs and their constituents. SMPs cannot accommodate this fight on their own and MEP23 agrees that increased online participation of the public is not enough on its own. To fight Euroscepticism and bring constituents closer to their representatives, especially in the crisis-inflicted countries, requires more structural than communicational solutions.

4.2.3 Electoral systems

There is a group of MEPs (2, 4, 6, 10, 19 and 20), who pinpoint how the existing electoral system for the EP election in their country, is influencing the way constituents and the MEPs go about interacting in SMPs. Among member states included in this study, Greece and Cyprus use an Open List Proportional Representation system with a single national constituency, while Ireland uses a Single Transferable Vote system with regional constituencies. MEP2 thinks that the electoral system used in every EU state can hurt the quality of representation if it encourages the replacement of experienced MEPs with socially established figures or celebrities, who require more time to adapt to the EP routine. In the states where the electoral system requires a single national constituency (namely Greece and Cyprus), candidates who are already recognisable public figures get more easily elected. MEPs elected in a nationwide constituency need to maintain their national appeal and remain widely popular. Focusing on local interests or individualised requests is not rewarding for them. As a result…

> 'An MEP needs to remain focused on the big picture of representation. Responding to individual claims online is unnecessary and uninteresting because gaining a few hundred regional votes is not going to determine the overall electoral performance'. MEP2, 13/07/2016

To MEP2, the electoral system can work in this case as a disincentive to pursue individualised engagement with the constituents online, at least to those MEPs who prioritise their re-election.

From another point of view, MEP4 pinpoints that the main characteristic of the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) system is that voters can vote for candidates from different parties, evaluating them on their personality rather than their party's features.

> 'Due to the electoral system, I need not only to promote to the constituents my political ideas and views but also my personality as a political entity. The constituents are voting for the person more than they vote for the party'. MEP4, 31/08/2016

This affects the way MEPs use SMPs to present themselves to the public. More specifically, MEP6 openly admits that his/her primary motivation to start using SMPs was to promote the candidacy because of the existing electoral system. The electoral system became a parameter of the need for the MEPs to promote their work online

because they were elected in their own right as persons and not through a closed party list. MEP19 also thinks that the electoral system has much to do with the way the MEPs approach constituents in SMPs, because MEPs elected in a regional constituency, need to remain firmly attached to their constituents/voters by finding topics which are of direct reference to the constituency interests.

MEP10 favours the electoral systems which avoid the closed party lists and allow voters to choose their preferred candidate. This personalises the candidates' image by exposing them to the electorate as political figures. The constituents view their representatives in the EP not as faceless party-delegated politicians but as the outcome of people's choice. This is bringing the MEPs closer to the constituents who now feel like they can set their topics for discussion through the SMPs. On that issue, MEP20 reminds that the closed party list system does not require personalised campaigning and the candidates are only interested in securing an intra-party consent for placement in the high-rank positions (the number of MEPs elected is proportional to the party's performance in the election). In fact, with this system, many of the first-time running candidates, become established figures only after they get elected as MEPs. In contrast, the electoral system of proportional representation with a preferential vote in a single national constituency requires a massive amount of exposure before the election as it is vital to be 'known' in every single national region. In such a case, one must exploit all available means, and the SMPs can help a lot to gain more exposure.

4.2.4 EP processes and MEP resources

The way the MEPs allocate their resources for social media exploitation is a matter of personal choice and prioritisation. However, MEPs 8, 11 and 22 made clear that specific EP processes during their work as MEPs, affect the way social media is shaped in the eyes of the constituents, who then choose to engage accordingly. MEP8 believes that major EU decisions are taken behind closed doors, without an open consultation with the public. Even the processes of getting the MEPs' signatures in the various proposals and legislation amendments, is somewhat questionable. As a result, the citizens question the democratic potential of the current structure and fail to connect with the outcome of the decision-making process. MEP11 insists that MEP proposals in the EP

are designed to embrace all European citizens. When an MEP submits a proposal, he/she must take into account if and how it affects all of the member states. This requires investigating the existing good practices, choosing the best among them, examining the accumulated experience from various states, comparing North-South differences and suggesting legislation which compromises these differences in a mutually beneficial way.

> 'The long series of inclusive activities that surround the MEP proposals are not disseminated to the public. The constituents only learn about the very final stage of the process, which is the vote in the Plenary. They never learn about the massive background effort the MEPs produce. Thus they cannot appreciate their contribution'. MEP11, 06/09/2016

MEP22 criticises the process of allocating the various legislative topics to the MEPs. It seems that the way the EP is organising the Committees and deciding which MEPs become Rapporteurs for the most critical cases suffers from distortion. MEPs from smaller countries who can do some quality work are given cases of minimal importance, rarely being assigned to big projects. Topics with significant added value are usually allocated to MEPs from larger countries (France, Germany) and their affiliates. This distorts the MEPs' capacity to be accountable to their constituents and removes the element of comparable objective evaluation of the MEPs.

> 'It is the EP that has to change its procedural philosophy so that the MEPs can be objectively assigned responsibilities and be evaluated for them. Then the MEPs will not have to use SMPs extensively to make publically known how much or how little they contributed to the EP objectives'. MEP22, 11/07/2017.

In other words, the MEPs have the incentive to provide accountability information online because the EP itself hampers the opportunities of some MEPs to perform well in the EP.

The MEPs are individuals with a wide variety of tasks and activities to perform. Consequently, their involvement in SMPs requires them to allocate resources in the form of time, associates or capital. The majority of the interviewed MEPs emphasised on the first two as the resources most related to their social media engagement. Most of the MEPs (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22 and 24) stressed the importance of time availability, while a few MEPs (7, 11, 12 and 17) made explicit reference to the

importance of associates and handlers for the administration of social media accounts. MEPs 3, 5, 6, 8, 15, 20 and 22 acknowledge that the limited resources are the apparent barrier to developing social media engagement further. The lack of available time, in particular, is the most significant obstacle. An MEP cannot stay online all day long because of other activities and time constraints. There are hundreds of votes in Strasbourg, and it is more important to spend time on the details of legislation, rather than debating endlessly with constituents online. The MEPs attend events, give speeches and interviews, work in the committees, travel overseas for EP work, and there are no particular limitations between the various tasks that an MEP has to perform. This is particularly the case for first-time MEPs who have so many things to learn about the processes, procedures and mechanisms around the EP, which is almost impossible to spend more time online. MEP24, for example, is dealing with a plethora of issues related to more than one Committees. To him/her, it makes sense that some of those may be overlooked, as it is hard to keep track of everything.

> 'In fact, time is so limited that most of the social media interactions take place when I am inside the chambers during the various Committee meetings and EP sessions'. MEP24, 18/07/2017

MEP4 feels that all engaging constituents should be allocated time proportionally but finding equal time for all, is a herculean task. That is why he/she avoids online engagement with the constituents even when they have something to suggest. MEP6 also admits that he/she avoids any in-depth discussion of EU issues because there is not sufficient time to be online for more than once or twice per day. The MEPs cannot spend time online all day long, and although MEP14 has a positive general view of SMPs, any further social media involvement is almost impossible. Some MEPs like 8, 19 and 21 would be willing to invest more resources in SMPs if this brings more added value to policy formation and as long as the constituents prove their genuine interest with their ongoing participation and contribution. Still, they stress that time availability is always a constraint that has to be taken into account.

MEP11 understands that SMPs are evolving and becoming part of everyday life for both the public and the MEPs but points out that the MEPs must be able to remain concentrated without losing focus because of a new tweet, comment or remark. This requires the use of trained associates and the allocation of more budget and means that

some MEPs will either use SMPs as 'shop windows' to their public profile or invest more resources, in order to savour a 24/7 supervision of the social media accounts that will allow them to engage with the public on a continuous basis. MEP12 is one of the MEPs who generally avoid embarking in direct engagement due to the lack of available time and has delegated associates to administer social media accounts. These trained associates receive from the constituents various interactions like commenting, sentiment expression, debate requests etc. and filter them towards MEP12. In the same line, MEP17 can only see further involvement if there is some form of support for the MEPs and currently the only available support comes from the national party in the form of associates, with one of them being delegated to manage the social media accounts. However, to maintain this kind of social media management on a permanent and 'industrial' basis (recording speeches, taking pictures, uploading material, managing comments and incomings among other things) requires more resources, especially if this involves policy discussion. As MEP7 states, generating added value from online interactions is translated as the extraction of worthy ideas/proposals from the constituents. For this to be feasible, a considerable amount of resources in the form of time and associates needs to provided, and it becomes questionable whether this 'investment' is worthy of the trouble. Eventually,

> 'It is every MEP's responsibility to prioritise how important it is for his/her role as a representative to use SMPs regularly, before deciding how many resources to allocate and for what purpose'. MEP7, 05/09/2016

4.3 Internal parameters

In this paragraph, the focus is on the internal parameters and how they affect what happens in the virtual arena. The synthesis of the online audience, the quality and balance of the interactions, the distortion generated by the expression of sentiment which escalates to excess noise with the assistance of trolls and malicious users, the design features and the inherent flaws of the platforms were the most prevalent internal parameters which affect the discourse in SMPs.

4.3.1 Synthesis, quality and features of the audience

Regarding who is engaging online (other than the MEPs) and what characteristics do the engaging constituents possess, MEPs (1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23 and 24) offered their impressions after engaging with the constituents in the two major SMPs. Regarding the audience's origin, MEP4 thinks that almost all of the followers in Facebook are partisan supporters or constituents voting for him/her. In other words, this sample of the electorate is rather positively biased, and the comments received are mostly supportive. That is not the case on Twitter, because followers there are not necessarily supporters but politically interested citizens in general. MEP8 also feels that the type of engaging audience remains stable and specific, with many of the followers being personal affiliations. MEP10 tried to analyse the synthesis of the audience he/she engaged with and found that it is somewhat mixed. In Twitter, they are mostly experts, academics and journalists or vicious trolls and a handful of motivated well-intentioned citizens. In Facebook, the engaging audience is the same that would engage with the MEP offline in the various gatherings and events, i.e. voters and supporters. Almost 70% of those who interact online are constituents, and 10% are industry experts. The remaining 20% are the trolls. In the case of MEP6 only journalists and experts, i.e. people attached to the EP on a professional level, choose to interact in SMPs. MEP6 claims that the general public loses interest in topics it cannot understand or for complex policy discussions. As a result, it comes down to dealing with experts, academics, journalists, NGOs and specialist groups. Consequently,

> 'Brussels remains a place for experts and technocrats and policy discussion in SMPs is something exotic. That is why achieving an ongoing online consultation with the average constituent, is the greatest challenge for an MEP'. MEP6, 05/09/2016

Without going as far as limiting the audience to experts, MEP1 agrees that constituents online are more specialised than the average constituent, either professionally or in terms of their political interests. This is reflected in the MEP's belief that the proper use of the SMPs requires some form of training.

In contrast to MEPs 1 and 6, MEP11 thinks that the type of constituents who interact online is that of an everyday 'average' citizen. To his/her opinion, older people use the

internet now almost as much as younger people, and regardless of why they use SMPs in their social life, MEP11 expects people of all ages and backgrounds to be able to engage politically. MEP12 agrees that most constituents are keen on using technology and SMPs; therefore, the average audience in SMPs is not an expert audience. The audience between the two platforms is generally different. Similarly, MEP3 does not think that social media users are the more refined citizens, informed, educated, politically active or knowledgeable of SMPs' features. The audience online is diverse, with different origins and different purposes, and there is no conformity. Constituents have a similar understanding of the issues, whether they use SMPs or prefer traditional media like the television. MEP10 thinks that the users of SMPs are representatives of the average citizen, they are not specialised experts, but on average, they may be informed and willing to contribute to public dialogue. MEP20 also thinks that it is too hard to determine the exact synthesis of the social media audience. They are mostly personal friends, party supporters, provocative trolls and those few who seek more detailed information. Regarding their characteristics, someone could say that they are at the very least IT-oriented, informed and politically involved. MEP9 also does not consider the interacting constituents to be a group with exceptional qualities. This was perhaps the reality of the early years of social media when some IT skills or a certain degree of interest and awareness was needed. Today the phenomenon is so generalised, that no safe conclusions can be drawn about a particular typology of constituents who interact online.

There is a series of MEPs who think that the audience is mostly affiliated with the party of origin. MEP14 believes that most of the constituents communicating online are either party supporters/voters or opponent trolls who use malicious behaviour to polarise the communication. MEPs 16, 17 and 24 also recognise that the audience is comprised mostly of friends and political supporters. Many of those who follow the MEPs are political friends but not necessarily actively involved in the party. The remaining portion is divided between partisan youth, personal friends or opponents who have a political stake to monitor online behaviour based on electoral competition.

> 'In SMPs, the majority of followers can be a favourable audience or else a self-selected sample because they are mostly party supporters or personal friends or in some other way positively affiliated'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

There is a growing amount of people from other parties, people from abroad with interest in committee works, as well as experts (academics, technocrats, journalists etc.) who observe the MEPs' activity online without necessarily interacting with them. MEP16 thinks that the audience in Twitter is more politically oriented either due to their interest or to their profession (e.g. journalists, policy experts). To MEP21, there are different layers of the audience in the SMPs. There are apparent supporters and partisan friends, but there are also followers outside the party circle who are generally interested in listening to the MEP's views. Regarding the platforms, on Twitter, people are more politically involved, and there is also a considerable amount of journalists who follow the MEPs in order to receive on-the-spot responses. On Facebook, there is a more informal character and constituents who like to claim that the MEPs are their online friends.

Some of the MEPs feel they have a very diverse audience and find it very hard to categorise their origin. MEP15 is surprised by the variety of constituents who choose to interact and show their interest in his/her work so far. Those who interact are not only the party supporters; there are many people from other parties who chose to make contact online too. Social media seems to be the medium for a broader range of constituents to access their representatives and MEP15 would like to experience even more online interactions with non-party supporters. MEP23 feels that it is mostly the younger constituents who interact online through the SMPs but is not in a position to categorise or distinguish them according to any special features demonstrated online. MEP13 has the sense that the online audience is the same regardless of the platform that is used or the topics of discussion. MEP19 feels that he/she has more appeal to the younger audience of the party supporters, who use SMPs more frequently. Regardless of the audience synthesis, to MEPs 19 & 20, the SMPs are closed circles of an audience which is not representative of the society, so the discussions taking place cannot be justified as adequately expressing public opinion.

> 'The social media population is not representative of the whole society. What happens in SMPs is not reflective of the outside world to rely upon it entirely for generalisations'. MEP19, 30/05/2017

Regarding the quality of online audiences, MEP2 is not keen to make generalisations. In the MEP's experience, the constituents act online with extreme speed, posting

messages which indicate that they are either highly specialised or extremely superficial individuals. In Facebook, the duration of their online presence (as measured by associates) is very limited, and this stresses the MEP to keep their interest alive constantly. MEP8 encountered constituents who although started contributing they soon got bored and abandoned the effort. In general, only a proportion of 10%-15% of the total comments received is of general worth and interest. The majority are overwhelmed with mocking and trolling attitude, and as a result, the meaningful engagement taking place online is minimal. MEP22 has had instances of online interaction with constituents who wanted to listen to various views before formulating their own; they were looking for practical explanations and were not afraid to use their real identity when engaging. These occasions have been infrequent, and the constituents who are educated, cultured and civilised enough to do so are only a handful, less than 10% of the total engagers. MEP7 estimates that only 10% of the audience, demonstrates a sincere interest for political developments. This small portion is nevertheless valuable and should be encouraged to offer their contribution to new ideas and proposals. MEP7 finds Facebook more appropriate as a platform that sustains the exchange of opinions because the audience possesses more tolerance than aggression. According to MEP3, the estimated percentage is even smaller. Only a miserable 5% of the approaches received online, are of interest and contribute somewhat to the construction of arguments. The rest is coming from attention seekers, complaining, demanding, insulting or noisy individuals.

MEPs 16 & 24 notice that the views and comments received online are mostly comments of praise and support, coming from followers who respond out of habit or sympathy, sometimes without even reading the posts. The negative comments are rare and usually come from the same accounts for almost every issue (trolls). MEP16 sees this as a form of biased political communication, which is not necessarily adding value to political participation. MEP20's experience with the audience is that they are unable to form constructive and realistic proposals. People interact only to satisfy their communicational needs with no real interest in the current issues and topics. This seems to be exacerbated by a lack of appropriate education or background, which results in a generally poor contribution (both linguistically and ideologically).

> ‘SMPs are fragments of the society and essentially work like bubbles where the democracy of likes prevails. If the quality of political dialogue depends upon the quality of the participants, then the interactions in SMPs have minimal value if not minimal dignity’. MEP20, 07/06/2017

MEP21 thinks that although there are some users capable of quality contributions, who can benefit the public debate with their views and the MEPs with their suggestions, the average level is unsatisfactory and the number of quality engagements remains a small minority. As a result, the amount of substantial dialogue online is small. MEP8 finds the quality of the interactions to be poor and discussion with the citizens to be almost extinct. The interacting constituents think that writing a couple of lines is equal to debating. MEP12 avoids online engagements because the quality of the debate and the way constituents express themselves is inferior and overwhelmed with aggression or even abuse. MEP22 goes even further. He/she considers social media to be a measuring tool of human stupidity, useful to determine how much uneducated the citizens are!

> ‘My constituents are mostly interested in getting a free trip to Brussels or curious to find out how much is the MEPs’ salary. The majority of citizens demonstrate absolute ignorance about the EU affairs in general and immense lack of interest in the EP in particular’. MEP22, 11/07/2017

MEP11 agrees that the audience is not 'ready' yet for meaningful interactions. When he/she initiated a public forum in his/her webpage, trying to stimulate online interactions with the constituents, they were reluctant to participate, and the response rate was poor.

In a more supportive mood, MEP17 thinks that constituents nowadays receive thousands of different pieces of information inside or outside the internet.

> ‘There is too much information to be absorbed, and people get tired of extensive analyses. They are mostly drawn to short narratives that make an impression to them. This is why their feedback is similar, taking the form of short, fragmented comments’. MEP17, 11/05/2017

Although very rare, MEP17 finds it feasible to embark upon engagement of substantial length or depth. MEP15 also feels a fruitful interaction online is feasible if the MEPs are genuinely keen to facilitate the process, while MEP6 very rarely if there is a chance of a serious conversation about the legislation he/she works on, might turn an interaction to a proper discussion. The real problem for MEP23 is that discussions online are

opinionated more than fact-determined, and this creates emotional distortions and misunderstandings.

> 'There is always the danger of reproducing or encouraging biased views and information and the MEPs should give their best effort to expose citizens to the real facts of EU policy-making'. MEP23, 14/07/2017

4.3.2 Sentiment expression

As previously presented, the various crises influence the external landscape of social media in conjunction with the overall 'gap' that exists between the constituents and their MEPs. The disassociated constituents, inflicted by crisis and austerity, had the need to express their negative feelings and discovered in social media the medium to do so. There are MEPs (1, 9, 13, 14, 15 and 22) who find this natural and bearable (if not acceptable), retaining an optimistic view and MEPs (7, 8, 9, 18, 21, 23 and 24) who blame sentiment expression for the quality of online interactions and remain sceptical about the future potential of SMPs. It must be clarified here, that 'sentiment expression' is not considered under a particularly positive or negative meaning, and that is why the MEPs' responses are mixed. In later stages, it will be demonstrated how the MEPs link sentiment expression with the internal parameters of social media, by associating it with the amount of noise and trolling which they have to put up with online.

MEPs 1 & 15 have experienced the online expression of sentiment by constituents, but feel very comfortable with it because, in a time of crisis, this can be appreciated as a proof of originality. Spontaneity is seen as much more preferable in comparison to the editing interventions of the traditional media.

> 'Social media dialogues if they are honest and unbiased, reflect the original expression of public opinion even when they are overwhelmed by sentiment'. MEP1, 12/07/2016

MEP15 feels that the majority of online interactions is overwhelmed by strong sentiment, which sometimes takes the form of rage because of the consequences of the economic crisis.

> 'When the source of negative sentiment is gone, reason and logic will provide the answers to the practical problems. The constituents address the various issues more rationally once a crisis is over'. MEP15, 02/02/2017

Therefore, SMPs will not permanently suffer from sentimental bursts because sentiment can also transform into constructive dialogue. MEP9 is also very appreciative towards sentimental engagements, finding them honest and useful as long as they do not become intentionally abusive. MEP14 has experienced a plethora of positive emotional interactions online, related to personal circumstances. He/she thinks that the public has discovered in SMPs the way to express their inner thoughts, and this makes them more extrovert and willing to interact online, which is a good thing. MEPs 13 & 15 have also received by the engaging constituents mostly praise, claims and requests to act in a specific way for the more exciting topics. The positive and negative feedback MEP22 receives about his/her work in the EP is usually divided equally (50%-50%).

In contrast to the above views, MEP7 thinks that too much sentiment becomes a severe problem for the quantity and quality of feedback that constituents provide via SMPs. There is a general tendency from the vast majority (80-90%) of the public to provide comments and critique which are endogenously aggressive, with no counter-arguments or proposals that could be further discussed in a civilised manner. As MEP8 confirms, the issues are only addressed superficially by the constituents without digging deep inside the arguments. It is more convenient or natural to them to express a sentiment which often has a severe nature. MEP23 finds the positive/negative sentiment to be often expressed in a way which is unrelated to the issues. In many instances, constituents express their opinion with intensity about the policies that affect them directly. It is their stereotypes about the EU that dictate constituents to express positive or negative sentiment MEP9 thinks, and this is a fragmented process which cannot lead to any substantial results. MEP21 agrees that whenever constituents want to criticise their MEPs, they are using sentimental comments which reach the limits of rage. MEP24 thinks that social media is nothing more for constituents than a medium for sentiment expression and feedback of praise/disapproval. A moderate view comes from MEP18 who sees in SMPs a public podium for citizens where they express themselves freely with sentiment, praise or criticism. Although this is a privilege for the constituents who engage in SMPs, the degree of maturity with which it is used has been questioned.

> ‘Unfortunately, during the crisis, the constituents have been expressing sentiment without any limitation, censorship, filter or permission. The lack of maturity (to say the least) has been unbelievable’. MEP18, 22/05/2017

4.3.3 Noise & trolling

The overall quality of interactions that the interviewed MEPs have experienced has proven inadequate to sustain a robust and enthusiastic engagement over the major SMPs. It seems that MEPs have had to deal with a polarised audience, either too friendly (supporters) or too hostile (opponents) lacking the unbiased 'middle ground' of constituents, who would attend a discussion or evaluate the work of the MEPs with an open mind. This resulted in the division of the sample of MEPs into two major blocks, the optimistic MEPs (3, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 18 and 21) who are willing to continue their online engagement exploring all available options and the pessimistic MEPs (2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22 and 24) who prefer to retract their social media involvement to only the most controllable and basic of functions.

Concerning the optimists, MEP3 thinks there is a large amount of 'trolling' online and would like to be able to define the terms of an online engagement before this takes place. For this reason, he/she favours the establishment of filters within structured platforms. If there is too much confrontation, the well-intended constituents and their contributions might get lost in a sea of noise and SMPs will turn into chambers of abuse for the participants. The answer to this is to maintain controlled online environments, with rules and conditions for the participants. MEP5 agrees that trolling is the number one enemy of social media interactions. The majority of constituents use SMPs as useful communication tools, but there are users with a permanent negative view on everything (intentional or impulsive), who limit the chances of open, rational engagement with the genuinely interested constituents.

> 'Online trolls are an abusive but powerful minority. The modification of regulation should offer a solution against them or at least a framework to discourage them'. MEP5, 31/08/2016

MEP10 receives a mix of comments and views, some positive, some negative and some constructive. In most of the instances, he/she has not experienced massive trolling, and the constituents had a good observation or comment to make.

> ‘I believe that radical trolling is gradually becoming the minority, and the SMPs are entering a maturity stage, where online abuse will deteriorate. To make sure it will become obsolete, we need to introduce rules of contact based on civil behaviour. I know it sounds optimistic, but I believe in the potential of online self-improvement’. MEP10, 06/09/2016

MEP11 has received hateful comments only once or twice in all these years of service, and this was mainly on Twitter. Trolling in his/her case is even less than 5%. People, in general, are quite emotional, expressing their views with tension about the general state of affairs, but MEP11 is not receiving the overwhelming abuse that some other colleagues do. Similarly, MEP13 cannot remember having received any negative feedback or malicious approach from trolls. MEP18 thinks it is the responsibility of the users to preserve the functional attributes of SMPs and protect the platforms from turning into chambers of abuse and propaganda. Whether they are used for marketing or accountability or dialogue purposes, SMPs should not be rejected based on trolling, which represents only a minority of the users inside an ‘ocean’ of well-intended and concerned citizens. Hateful comments and abusive behaviour should be ignored, and constructive critique should be used for self-improvement purposes. It is evident from their claims that the experience of the MEPs mentioned above has been positive so far, and that is why they sound optimistic.

There are also several stoic MEPs, who think that trolling is a default ingredient of SMPs which must be taken for granted.

> ‘Trolling is so much consolidated and unavoidable that those who do not attract considerable trolling in their social media accounts must wonder if they are boring or uninteresting to the eyes of the public’.
> MEP13, 06/09/2016

MEP21 is rather indifferent because dealing with toxic interactions is an inevitable process that the MEPs have to face. SMPs are, in a way, uncontrollable when it comes to the participants. Thus there will always be manipulation, distortion and populism present in the platforms. The MEPs can choose whom to talk to and must be prepared to filter those few interactions that have something to offer. MEP12 considers SMPs to be a normative evolution, a tool imposed by technological development, which makes life easier. It can be used for both good and bad purposes, and unfortunately, those who

use it for a useful purpose are still not many. MEP12 thinks there should be more political discussions online and less trolling and superficial communication because currently the masses are more attracted by the noise. To strengthen this argument, MEP21 believes that some constituents embark in provocative comments because they want to confront other people's views and not the MEPs themselves. They use the MEP's account and MEP references in order to 'dress' their views with formality and credibility.

> 'Constituents sometimes try to promote themselves as active citizens or even to accumulate anonymous credibility with a virtual persona, which may be more adventurous or participating than that in their everyday life'.
> MEP21, 20/06/2017

About the pessimists, MEP2 concludes that the quality of online interactions is inferior and comparable to the quality of cheap TV talk shows, i.e. full of anger, noise and confrontation. The fact that TV and traditional media lose their appeal to the public brings social media to the forefront.

> 'If someone's online discourse is a representation of who he/she is, then the pathogenies of traditional media have been transferred to the new media because the quality of online content is sometimes poorer than that of trash-TV'. MEP2, 13/07/2016

During campaigning periods the quality of interaction deteriorates rapidly, but during routine timeframes, there may be a larger pool of original contributions to choose from. MEP4 has engaged in the past with journalists for high-covered topics but has avoided interaction with general members of the public. There are too many constituents with political agendas who prefer confrontation than real conversation and engage in provoking an argument. MEP6 thinks that the MEPs have been receiving extensive trolling and attacks online because of being located in the heart of the decision-making centres, responsible for the reforms and anti-crisis measures taken in the inflicted states. He/she is not participating in any way to interactions with those who seem to be abusive or populist with unclear intentions.

Although MEP7 follows a didactic and informative approach online, this produces no results because of the vitriolic behaviour of the public towards everything and everyone. He/she believes that SMPs are endogenously favouring online confrontation and sentiment expression, more than the exchange of arguments and proposals. MEPs 8 &

9 believe that the internet is overwhelmed by aggressiveness, which hampers any effort for real interaction and serious debate. Having received continuous trolling, MEP9 similarly chooses not to engage in online discussions and considers SMPs to be creating dangerous effects that may be reproduced offline in real society.

> 'The internet is legitimising a nihilistic type of political behaviour which becomes routine for citizens and is then reproduced in their everyday life'. MEP9, 06/09/2016

This disorienting negative influence makes the qualitative analysis of social media content almost impossible because the noise covers everything. As a result, counting or interpreting positive/negative comments and likes online leads to false inferences. The prospect of substantial online dialogue with constituents is not something that will flourish overnight, according to MEP17. The current levels of engagement can improve, but the social media space is overwhelmed with indifference and 'trolling', from those who find an escape from their exhausting daily routine. This is a disincentive for further engagement of the few well-intended constituents and for the MEPs themselves, who become sceptical about the prospect of substantial dialogues online. MEP19 is accepting that in theory, there can be room for discussion in social media, but in practice, there is usually much noise involved. SMPs can be an effective mobilisation mechanism to bring constituents together under the same cause but…

> 'It is not feasible to have fruitful debates online because the platforms have become clustered. We (the MEPs) must protect ourselves from never-ending discussions of arguable intention with the keyboard warriors who want to decompose or mock the process of online interaction'. MEP19, 30/05/2017

MEPs 14 & 16 are also facing online abuse from trolls and feel like being in a perpetual war of discourse. The negative feedback is extremely hostile, coming from political opponents or political 'trolls', who manage to overwhelm the interactions with negative energy and discourage well-intended citizens from sharing their views. To MEP20, there is no real political dialogue taking place online. It is mostly an interaction of likes and short comments. These comments are mostly criticising in an unconstructive way and are heavily biased with a negative sentiment which often becomes vulgar. Receiving suggestions or ideas is extremely rare, so the overall judgement is that there is virtually no policy dialogue taking place online. Especially when it comes to the economic crisis,

constituents have been very critical to a grotesque level with personal attacks and accusations of corruption for MEP22 and the other MEPs.

> 'To me, the SMPs are a form of group psychotherapy for the masses, designed for people who need to outbreak their negativity and rage anonymously. On the one hand, the online abuse exposes the degree of the devaluation of the politicians in the citizens' consciousness. On the other hand, the result is that as an MEP, I no longer have any trust in constituents' judgement'.

To MEPs 22 & 24 experience, the negative comments are extraordinarily harsh and impolite, with elements of rancour and bullying instead of suggestions and proposals. Quite often, these negative comments are prescribed by political opponents.

4.3.4 Platform design

To MEP7, the expectation for more significant future contributions of SMPs to constituents' representation, is related to the type and characteristics of the platforms, but as MEPs 19&24 stress, the design features of the platforms impose certain limitations and preferences. The technical restrictions imposed by the platforms, link different types of audiences to them. Overall, as MEP17 suggests, the nature of the existing SMPs is in line with the tendency of modern people to exchange information without actually analysing it. Endogenously, the character of contemporary SMPs is to focus on impression rather than substance via the use of provocative phrases:

> 'For many MEPs, the reason to use SMPs is to win supporters based on how trendy and catchy an idea seems and not how feasible or practically valuable it is'. MEP17, 11/05/2017.

Exactly because Twitter and Facebook differ in terms of the types of engagements someone can have, MEPs 4 & 19 think that both should be used complementarily. Having so many available means of communication (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, emails, telephone calls), means that a whole administration system is required to manage different platforms for different tasks. As MEP16 advises, there is no reason for an MEP to expand any further than the two major platforms, as this would fragment his/her online presence and weaken the transmitted message.

A first distinction between the two platforms relates to their character as communicational means. MEPs 1, 2, 16, and 17 consider Twitter to be more open, synchronous and interactional than Facebook. It is seen as more on-the-spot, requiring immediate responses and personal involvement. Consequently, it is more intimate and has an interactional character providing the potential for synchronous exchanges. The fact that it attracts a broader audience with followers outside the MEP's comfort zone, also makes Twitter a useful response tool, successful in the dissemination of a position directly and instantaneously. This is also why most of the MEPs prefer to personally manage their Twitter accounts, while associates often administer Facebook accounts. MEPs 1, 4, 12, 16, 21 and 23 consider Facebook to be less official, involving interactions of a more personal nature. It is seen as a less formal platform where the followers already have some affiliation with the MEP. This makes it more convenient for some MEPs to use Facebook to communicate with supporters and to post personal information while trying to convince and build support with their broadcasts. Facebook posts have somehow the character of traditional blog publications, which facilitate more extensive commentaries related to the broadcasting of news and personal views.

On the other hand, as MEPs 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 12, 20, 23 and 24 suggest, Twitter is designed for short phrases of impression or informational exchanges which make it ideal as a platform for impression generation or to create a public status or to stir things up and draw attention to an argument. Twitter requires the use of expressions, catch lines and abbreviations; thus, it can be beneficial if an MEP wants to leave a personal mark about an issue. As MEP5 states, it is mostly about getting an opinion-statement out in the open and then receiving instant reactions in the form of responses that indicate the acceptance or decline of the statement. Making others agree with the view is not essential, as long as they take further action to disseminate (retweet) the MEPs' version of the story. MEP12 thinks that Twitter encourages the use of provocative populist quotes and him/her being neither populist nor provocative, means that using it would distort an already established brand. In Twitter, the effort is to stand out, talk to media and opponents and create a unique space to set out a position or opinion. Alternatively, as MEP23 indicates, Twitter can be used for promotional updates of events and activities that the MEP is attending or organising for the constituents. With these features in mind:

> 'It is imperative for the MEPs to make use of Twitter as a method to remain socially active and identified within the virtual political scene. Twitter is appropriate for playing the game of impressions'. MEP7, 05/09/2016.

MEPs 20 & 24 believe that in the modern days, facilitating impressions more than arguments, has substituted (but by no means successfully replaced) democratic participation. The MEPs who feel thirsty for arguments, justifications and realistic proposals, are not prone to use Twitter to hold lengthy debates with the public.

This opens the issue of which platform do the MEPs think that is best to facilitate policy discussions with the constituents, which is one of the main functions of representation that this thesis examines. There are some MEPs (2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 14, 17, 19 and 21) who are categorical that Twitter is not a platform capable of facilitating any form of serious dialogue engagement. The main argument for this is the character limit that Twitter imposes to the posts. These MEPs find it hard to broadcast expert opinions and messages within a character limit, which reduces the chances for meaningful debates and substantial online discussion. The use of 'catchy' expressions hampers the potential of a fruitful dialogue. MEP14 thinks that Twitter can be used for political commentary but not for an extensive political analysis. That does not exclude people from expressing their views on Twitter. MEP19 calls it a 'repository of opinions', but that is far from being a dialogue forum. Based upon these opinions, MEP21 thinks that Twitter is ideal for the ignition of debate but lacks the depth to facilitate the completion of a dialogue which incorporates proposals. For those arguing about the value of retweeting for dialogue purposes, MEP17 clarifies that through the retweets a position can expand to wider audiences, but this is not adequate for an analysis of the parameters of an issue or for the MEPs who want to analyse in extent their views with complex arguments rather than mere mentions.

The group of MEPs mentioned above expresses a preference towards Facebook when it comes to discussing and debating with the constituents. As MEP21 states, Facebook, although a platform with less formality, has the potential to support individual political exchanges, through the use of the embedded Messenger application. MEP14 also emphasises on the use of this internal application, which facilitates the MEPs' swapping between the public and the private domain, something beneficial when in need to have

a confidential one-to-one interaction. MEP10 is one of the MEPs who choose the 'industrial' approach towards SMPs, trying to exploit the benefits with the help of a team of associates and social media experts. According to his/her analysis:

> 'Facebook is more appropriate for in-depth discussions with constituents, it has credibility, and the views received there are more substantial and can be further used'. MEP10, 06/09/2016.

As a result, MEP10 uses Facebook for the exchange of views with the constituents and Twitter to address experts and influencers who can further strengthen his/her arguments (as further explained in section 7.3.4). MEP9 also uses Facebook more than Twitter because Facebook is seen as more 'honest' and real interactions may occur there more often, while Twitter is overwhelmed by trolls and fake profiles and this traumatises the trustworthiness of the platform. MEP19 agrees that Twitter is more prone to noise and trolls. Furthermore, it is not as innovative as it used to be and the audience there is not as broad as in Facebook. A further interesting point raised by MEP19 when it comes to discussions online is that…

> 'I find it difficult to ignore a public approach online because a whole audience is watching at the same time. This is often exploited by the constituents and increases the possibility of a debate or a dialogue'. MEP19, 30/05/2017.

Quite interestingly, there is a group of MEPs (8, 13 and 20) who do not seem to favour one platform over the other. MEP8 disputes the ability of both platforms to support meaningful engagement because they both have limited space, and it is hard to express political views and receive appropriate feedback. MEP20 agrees that SMPs have limitations which do not encourage the exchange of analytical ideas. Twitter may be limited in the number of characters, but Facebook is not ideal for synchronous debating either, so both platforms are not adequate for a real political dialogue. Finally, MEP13 disagrees with the voices criticising Twitter as inappropriate for online discussions. Twitter requires from the MEPs to be laconic rather than lyrical and use sharp and succinct content, but it is still adequate to support a debate or systematically put across a point. People on Twitter say things exactly as they think them, and if by any chance, interaction needs to expand further, there is always the option of private messaging.

4.3.5 Flaws and dangers

Apart from the design limitations of the SMPs, there is a series of flaws and online dangers which affect the motivation of the MEPs to engage online. The most mentioned by MEPs is the lack of adequate regulation and the issue of anonymity in SMPs. MEPs (1, 3, 5, 9, 17, 19 and 24) make particular reference to these two flaws. They think it is a disadvantage for the existing platforms that the regulatory framework for online behaviour is unclear, and anonymity can be exploited for malicious purposes. Anonymity is a controversial issue because although it is a desirable and vital feature for unbiased and free discussions in SMPs, it is considered by the MEPs as an element of the 'uncharted waters' of the web. The constituents participating in online dialogues must always feel secure to express their views anonymously and freely, but at the same time, there must be some form of control against abuse and trolling. The challenge in SMPs as the MEPs think is to create the feeling of security to the participants, without turning the platforms into chambers of entrapment, which restrain the openness of interaction.

MEP3 thinks that anonymity is a feature of SMPs that has been highly criticised as a liability which facilitates abuse.

> 'The prevailing SMPs must examine how online interactions can retain the element of anonymity and at the same time, ensure that there are rules in place for the punishment of abusive behaviour'. MEP3, 13/07/2016.

MEP5 thinks that anonymity is encouraging the use of abusive language. To safeguard that constituents will not abandon their involvement in SMPs, more legal or administrative parameters need to be in place, ensuring that trolls and their abuse will not affect the quality of communication. This is a big issue that can affect the penetration of SMPs to political audiences.

> 'Due to the lack of effective regulatory framework, the platforms can become uncontrollable, and the constituents may receive fake news and false information, thus formulate extreme views which may not be in any way justified'. MEP5, 31/08/2016

As a result, MEP9 is very sceptical and reluctant to use SMPs for further engagement with the public. MEP17 also agrees, thinking that a nameless interaction with someone who has no identity or no declared intention is somewhat of a risk, at the very least an MEP would waste his/her precious time. However, as MEP24 stresses, a verification of

whoever engages with the MEPs online in SMPs, is currently not possible and thus even the friendliest of chats can turn into a trolling session.

Although anonymity and indeterminate regulation are problematic, SMPs are nevertheless creating an open and accessible environment, which someone would expect to facilitate, in the very least, a pluralism of views and positions, adequate to intrigue the ignition of exchanges. According to some MEPs' experience (5, 10, 11, 16 and 21), this is not even the case. When MEP5 engaged in open online dialogues with multiple persons, this became an endless loop-process where the MEP's argument gradually lost its importance, as the MEP was trying to support it against many displeased voices. The MEP ended up defending him/herself against what someone else commented, rather than analysing the initially expressed argument. MEP11 also stresses out that constituents often express stereotype views rather than their genuine views, reproducing what the majority say in order to receive approval. This blocks some original minority opinions from emerging. MEP16 justifies this argument by stating that self-marketing is something that the public is also doing online, not just the MEPs. The constituents often 'self-promote' themselves online for their personal interests. That is why it is equally essential, according to MEP10, to keep in mind that social media is only a small part of the real world, not a mirror to the whole of society.

> 'Impressions and images transmitted online are often enlarged through the magnifying lenses of social media. We must keep a balance between social media activities and what happens in the real world'. MEP10, 06/09/2016.

Because of this, MEP21 stresses the danger of the dissemination of fake news, the existence of 'noisy' conversations with minimal value or quality and the exchange of populist or misleading messages. Social media is full of conflicting views, and only recently there have been signs of maturity, so it is yet unclear if the platforms should become even more open or go the opposite way and introduce filters and limitations.

4.4 Advantages of online political communication

Although a series of flaws, conflicts and discrepancies within a fragmented and polarised landscape create a somewhat adverse outcome against the prevalence of social media

among the MEPs, the interviewed MEPs have one common incentive which turns into the argument in favour of online political communication: that when they perform a comparison between mainstream media and social media, there is a series of benefits which at first seem to be self-value based but in reality, they affect accountability, policy discussion and branding.

4.4.1 Benefits for accountability

The surpassing of traditional media deficiencies provides the first series of incentives among MEPs (1, 4, 9, 16, 17 and 18) regarding the prevalence of SMPs in terms of coverage, cost and content filtering. MEPs 1 & 9 underline that social media is the contemporary way to communicate their work and activities to a broader audience and offer great accountability benefits due to their low cost. Traditional media is not always successful in the dissemination of accountability information to dispersed audiences, especially in the case of representatives who get elected in large nation-wide constituencies (e.g. Greece and Cyprus). The clear advantage of SMPs for nation-wide elected MEPs is according to MEP16 that they disperse information about their whereabouts and activities. Otherwise, the constituents would not even know that these MEPs existed. MEP4 expands this argument by suggesting that he/she cannot imagine being an MEP without using SMPs, due to the lack of systematic coverage of EP issues in the national media, which infuses an overly critical approach towards the MEPs. As MEP17 clarifies,

> 'Traditional media like the newspapers and TV channels, filter the content they wish to promote and an MEP's contribution can literary disappear'.
> MEP17, 11/05/2017

This is where SMPs become useful to MEPs from countries where the European topics do not receive extensive exposure, to keep their constituents informed of their work. MEP18 thinks that SMPs expand democratic freedom by allowing constituents to express their views as they please there and then.

> 'Traditional media functions without any scrutiny from the audience, therefore the messages they transmit are prescribed elsewhere'.
> MEP18, 22/05/2017

MEP9 thinks there is room for improvement and would like to see the SMPs supporting the constituents to become informed and educated about the EU in a more holistic way.

MEPs 3, 4 and 6 focus upon the interactive character of social media, adding as an advantage the ability to address the constituents whenever they express unjustified criticism which needs to be confronted with evidence. As MEP4 mentions, when the MEPs receive unreasonable and poorly rooted arguments, it is vital to use social media accounts to counterbalance the criticism and put things back in the right order using the real facts. In the case where someone's view is shaped by misinformation or propaganda, MEP6 tries to offer objective information about the reality behind the issues. Although debating based on indisputable facts is eventually appreciated by the constituents, those cases are rare, representing a small minority. On this issue, MEP3 thinks that although representational democracy is the best existing political system, the fact that the citizens are not as informed as they should is something that distorts representation. The constituents elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf about several issues they have no idea or interest about, and quite often these decisions have unforeseen consequences.

> 'The elected representatives avoid the burden of responsibility by assigning the aftermath of their judgement to the shoulders of those who elected them. This burden can be balanced, and the MEPs will accept their share of responsibility if we use SMPs to monitor the behaviour of the MEPs constantly'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

For the majority of the MEPs, a more forward-looking, almost normative optimism about the potential of technological developments seems to prevail. Acknowledging that traditional media has become unreliable and too slow in their responses, MEP7 considers SMPs to be undeniable tools of political communication for elected representatives. Social networking prevails as the contemporary method people use to exchange information and SMPs facilitate the participation of the constituents in the public sphere. Thus, MEP19 due to the modern character of SMPs finds it natural to present online his/her activities in the EP and often publishes content which describes the work done, to become more accountable.

> ‘Technological change is bound to bring new methods and tools in the political arena, and we should be supportive because the SMPs help us to fulfil our duties successfully’. MEP19, 30/05/2017

MEP15 shares this appreciation and recognises SMPs as a necessity. Meanwhile, he/she declares willing to support in the future a democratic system facilitated by internet technology, with online referendums and deeper participation of the constituents in decision making, as long as the security issues are resolved. As MEP18 reminds, a few decades ago, no constituent knew what the MEPs were doing or how they were working to represent them.

> ‘Social media expansion is in line with the normative process of social modernisation and represents a new type of informational revolution which favours both the citizens and the politicians’. MEP18, 22/05/2017

Even when the static broadcasting version of media prevails, social media remains a multifunctional tool with great informational value, which can further develop to produce positive results for the constituents. As MEP7 highlights, the internet brings forward new opportunities but also some significant responsibilities.

> ‘For the future of democracy in Europe, it is most important not only to select good representatives but also to ensure that societies can reach higher levels of political civilisation. The potential of the SMPs to improve or worsen the situation should not be taken lightly’. MEP7, 05/09/2016

Scepticism, either temporary or rooted, has also been expressed by some MEPs who are not entirely enthusiastic about the potential of SMP accountability. MEP15 was initially broadcasting from a static webpage, without having contact with the constituents. The lack of familiarity with SMP features and the fear of privacy restrictions made MEP15 to be cautious and reserved. This reluctance caused the publication of accountable information to be rare, and the motivation to actively engage with SMPs came mostly as an effort to follow the trend of social media. Similarly, MEP20 is not an extensive user or a big fan of SMPs but admits that there is usefulness in them. He/she supports SMPs to be used as accountability mechanisms dedicated to transparency and as tools that bring constituents closer to their representatives, but does not see room for further expansion and feels that as far as politicians are concerned, the contemporary SMPs have reached their limits. MEP22 is even more pessimistic and thinks that current online activity and information provided in SMPs is already excessive. His/her overall

experience is that SMPs can be useful to become accountable, but unfortunately, most of the platform participants do not use them with benign intentions. Thus he/she does not intend to use them more extensively in the future.

4.4.2 Benefits for policy discussion

There is an initial positive tendency to the innovating contribution of the SMPs in the facilitation of direct engagement with the constituents. MEPs 5 & 11 think that SMPs with their updating and informative character, save a lot of constituents' time from bureaucratic procedures and facilitate constituent approaches better than the traditional method of emailing and waiting for an MEP response or the booking of an appointment with the MEP. The constituents want to express themselves in their own pace and relaxation without pressure or external influences. MEP21 agrees that using SMPs makes interacting with the constituents much easier for the MEPs too. Physical interaction requires a series of logistics and arrangements (visits, speeches, tours, shaking hands), which are time-consuming and costly. MEP21 feels much more confident that he/she can forward thoughts and views from Brussels to the corners of the constituency without much effort or the need for physical presence. MEP1 thinks that SMP dialogues are an essential feature that will further develop, as long as the MEPs focus more on what the constituents say online, rather than to broadcast their message. The politicians should be prepared for further democratic innovations in the future and should not be afraid to embrace them. MEP3 supports the idea to facilitate constituents' participation in the design of policies technologically and hopes that SMPs will permit more direct decision making. MEP18 comments that the influence of social media in politics is far from superficial.

> 'Authoritarian regimes are afraid of SMPs after the phenomenon of social movements and revolutions initiating because of social media. There are also examples of electoral campaigns where SMPs defined the outcome. This proves how motivating and interactive these platforms are and why almost all politicians in the free world are using them either as a component of their communication strategy or even as a function in their political life'. MEP18, 22/05/2017

MEP18 thinks that the amount of discussion and dialogue online is steadily growing. The percentage is still small, but in the future, he/she is optimistic that SMPs will further facilitate the constituents' needs for dialogue.

Some MEPs proceed to comparisons between the alternate options for policy discussion offered by social media and the limitations of the traditional ways of disseminating policy views. These MEPs prioritise the public dialogue that takes place in SMPs over the one taking place in traditional media. MEP4 feels that SMPs are the only available method to disseminate his/her views because conventional media is not demonstrating interest for the European causes that he/she actively pursues. Moreover, traditional media can be very slow to create an in-depth dialogue about an issue, especially when the subject is too complicated or controversial. MEP17 agrees and finds social media very valuable as a substitute for traditional media in the promotion of positions related to topics of broader importance.

> 'The TTIP campaign gathered peers almost entirely from social media because traditional media was absent for a long time from this discussion. There was no other alternative'. MEP17, 11/05/2017

According to MEP16, the journalists have other news-related priorities that need coverage and accommodating the MEPs' views becomes a second-order choice. It is only during the significant EU political events that MEPs receive invitations from traditional media to address European issues. As MEP2 states, the SMPs growingly become mediums of convenience for the MEPs because of their advantage to facilitate direct individualised interactions. The MEPs must introduce a filtering process that allows them to select which approaches to respond to. MEP21 thinks that there is an individualistic intimacy in SMPs, which helps in the exchange of political views.

> 'There is a virtual intimacy which cannot be found in traditional media where a certain amount of time has to pass to achieve trust and overcome reservation'. MEP21, 20/06/2017

MEPs 21 & 23 declare their willingness to further engage with social media in the future, hoping to see more dialogue about the EU policies. SMPs should be seen as potential forums for political debate where fruitful outcomes in the form of proposals could be generated in collaboration with the constituents.

Nevertheless, a group of MEPs is not convinced about the capacity of social media to entirely substitute traditional media, and they are reluctant to embrace SMPs further. MEP20, although theoretically willing to engage in online discussions, is pessimistic about the potential of SMPs to produce policy. MEP20 is opposing the potential of SMPs as influencers of direct engagement because he/she does not consider them democratic enough.

> 'SMPs are creating a dangerous illusion of democracy where everyone is free to speak out their inner thoughts, but in reality, these are far from being conclusive and substantial views'. MEP20, 07/06/2017

MEP4 explains that constituents interact in SMPs differently than they do in real life. Using SMPs in anonymity allows constituents to have no control over their emotions. Public pressure can build up for an issue up to the point where it defines the character of the whole debate.

> 'But if too many people share the same consolidated view or demand online, how can anyone confront them even with rational arguments?' MEP4, 31/08/2016

For the same reason, MEP9 thinks that in the current state of the existing SMPs, if each MEP tries to use them independently for a spontaneous online discussion of policy issues without any centralised guidance, the results will be fragmented or misleading. As a result, MEP20 considers face-to-face interaction as more appropriate and prefers gatherings, speeches and public events as venues for the exchange of views and the discussion of future policies. Similarly, in MEP19's opinion, physically meeting the constituents is the only means for an in-depth conversation, especially if the issue is complex and requires further exploration. Interacting with constituents face-to-face is a feature of MEP's 'job' that he/she enjoys.

MEP7 is among the pessimists about the potential of democratic involvement or substantial dialogue, because his/her experience from national forums of legislative discussion, has not been positive. He/she claims that for the foreseeable future, the prevalence of profound statements in SMPs, will not contribute to the establishment of fruitful interactive communication between the MEPs and the constituents. The contributions from the constituents are shallow with poor quality of commentary and minimal proposals. Whenever MEP7 tries to express views and positions online with

other methods, e.g. to post an article/speech/interview, the response from the public is disappointing. MEP16's experience is quite similar leading to the assumption that whatever is presented online in the form of a statement with extensive text (e.g. article) or the formalities of the press (e.g. columns and titles), is automatically seen as uninteresting because it resembles a type of traditional media broadcasting that people outside SMPs find unattractive and dull.

> 'Anything that requires SMP users to spend more than two minutes of their time, whether it is text, video or voice recording, is seen as time-consuming and old-fashioned. Only broadcasts of short commentary or provoking phrases are received by the public with enthusiasm and responsive attitude'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

As MEP22 stresses, there is no sign of the required political culture for a quality dialogue among the participating constituents, and this limits the future potential of SMPs for substantial contributions to the political processes.

> 'With this general unwillingness for democratic engagement, even if technology introduces new mediums and platforms, the constituents will first seek to fulfil other more crucial needs than to discuss politics'. MEP22, 11/07/2017

In that respect, as MEP16 suggests, the existing SMPs may have reached the limits of their potential. In his/her view, the political arena has not been influenced by SMPs as anticipated, because the SMPs reproduce people's existing impressions rather than bringing in light new revolutionary ones.

> 'The relationship either favourable or antagonistic of the constituents with the MEPs and their parties is a 'religious' one. This minimises the chances for productive discussion of the issues'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

4.4.3 Benefits for brand promotion

The prevalence of social media in contemporary political life can be a problem and an opportunity as MEP12 indicates. This is particularly true for the MEPs from smaller parties or for those MEPs who do not receive extensive coverage via traditional media. MEP19 thinks that generally, the MEPs tend to receive less coverage from traditional media because the stories about what the MEPs do are limited in comparison to those for national MPs. One reason according to MEP16 is the geographic distance from

Brussels as a possible factor that restrains peripheral MEPs from been active in traditional national media (TV, radio, newspapers), as they have to spend a considerable part of their time abroad. In contrast, MEPs from continental Europe, achieve greater national media exposure, due to their proximity to Brussels and the frequent visit to their states. Another reason for the limited coverage of MEP activities from traditional media is according to MEP6 that the journalists usually give priority of coverage to news from the Council. Consequently, with the MEPs physically in the distance from the constituents and their work not adequately presented through the national media, social media is the only remaining way for the MEPs to promote themselves, their role and their work. As a result, SMPs becomes crucial to get the message across to the supporters, and the peripheral MEPs thankfully tend to their social media accounts to pursue the required exposure.

It is not only the MEPs from distant states or small parties who feel the need to use SMPs. The crisis aftermath has forced traditional media flaws to emerge making several MEPs to actively support the necessity to use social media as a promotional mechanism, claiming to be 'strangled' by traditional media boundaries and the treatment received by established mediums. The 'liberation' (MEP1) and 'independence' (MEP2) from the transactional and disciplinary limitations imposed by traditional media were incentives to engage more with SMPs, almost equal in importance like the ability to respond/comment on political developments in a rapid, autonomous way. Traditional media is also accused of banning politicians who expressed or promoted 'anti-systemic' views about how to tackle the crisis. MEPs 8, 15, 20 and 24 felt obliged to address the constituents through social media after traditional media blocked their exposure. Once considered anti-systemic, MEP8 was stripped from any media invitations.

Similarly, although not initially favourable to SMPs, MEP20 got obliged to use them:

> 'SMPs were the sole alternative method to communicate with the constituents, disseminate views and opinions and get exposure when treated as an 'outcast' from TV channels and the press'. MEP20, 07/06/2017.

MEP15 used the same expression (exclusion) to justify the extensive use of social media, as the remaining method to promote activities. MEP24 also admitted that number one motivation when using social media was to overcome traditional media exclusions.

MEP24 shaped his/her brand during the crisis through analyses and predictions about the inflicted austerity. After being critical towards the banking system, he/she faced exclusion from TV channels and the only alternative to preserve political popularity and appeal was to use SMPs. Finally, MEP14 agrees that using social media is like compensating for missing traditional exposure opportunities, but it is not an easy task for non-frequent users who are not keen to use SMPs. Furthermore, he/she feels that exclusion also exist online after having social media administrators shutting down the profiles with various excuses. To MEP14's this proves that…

> 'SMPs are not trustworthy because network administrators can also turn against anti-systemic MEPs'. MEP14, 31/01/2017.

4.5 Conclusion

During the interviews with the MEPs, it became apparent that their assumptions and arguments about communicating online with the constituents were based upon a particular view of the landscape of SMPs, which was influencing their decisions. It was deemed appropriate to clarify these views, because they frame the expectations the MEPs have from SMPs and their motivations to engage, providing answers to the 'how' and 'why' of their social media behaviour. This chapter presented the internal and external parameters that prevail in the SMP landscape of the crisis-inflicted states. It focused on answering whether this landscape affects the MEPs intention to interact with the constituents and if so, then how is the volume and nature of the interactions influenced by the imposed limitations. The influence of Euroscepticism, the synthesis of the audience, the quality of experienced interactions, the expression of sentiment in the form of harsh critique, the public sphere fragmentation, the noise of the trolls, the design flaws of the platforms, the allocation of resources, are all decisive parameters of online political communication which affect the levels of participation. Meanwhile, the comparison between mainstream media and social media benefits designates more strong incentives for the adoption of online communication by the MEPs.

CHAPTER 5 - PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

5.1 Introduction

The proliferation and rapid development of SMPs like Twitter and Facebook have now transferred part of the accountability provision process to the virtual arena. A mere observation of the MEPs' social media accounts is enough to see that more and more constituents access SMPs to address their representatives. MEPs tend to use SMPs either to timely respond to constituents' approaches or to offer in their initiative, a considerable amount of detailed information about their meetings, travels, Committee work, parliamentary questions, votes, speeches, reports and other EP-related activities. This chapter intends to determine the motivation and actual behaviour of the MEPs when offering accountability information online. Based upon the MEPs' perspectives, it will examine both the views of the MEPs about the constraints in the provision of accountability, whether online accountability is a response to citizen demand, whether it helps against public disengagement, whether this function is helpful for their political objectives. The chapter starts with the main motivations that MEPs claim to have and continues with the strategic choices they make online. Findings from the tweet analysis blend in this section to clarify the categories of activities the MEPs perform online in the name of accountability. The analysis of tweets is documenting the historical footprint of the MEPs during the chosen routine timeframe broken down to categories of action. A total of 3357 tweets were collected and analysed as Accountability (AC) tweets. Table 5 in Appendix VI lists the tweet categories and their definition.

5.2 Accountability motivations

During the interviews, the MEPs revealed motivations and incentives related to their choice to use SMPs to interact with their constituents. The perceptions of the MEPs on the usefulness of SMPs for accountability purposes were among those which could be clearly associated and undisputedly categorised. There were distinct values or incentives that the MEPs recognise as most important when using SMPs for accountability

purposes: transparency, legitimising their role while fulfilling their duty, ensuring consistency and performing self-evaluation for self-improvement.

5.2.1 Transparency and role clarification

Nearly half of the interviewed MEPs (4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23 and 24) find the motivation to use social media for accountability purposes, in the feature of greater transparency and clarification of their role to the constituents. When online, the MEPs use Twitter to fulfil a wide array of informational duties as indicated by the relevant categories of the tweet analysis. They inform constituents mostly through Statements, Direct information, Interventions in the Plenary, Updates, Official Questions and by providing links to traditional media where the constituents can verify the provided information. These activities account for about 44% of their accountability tweets. The activities which are less promoted by the MEPs is their work on Amendments and official EU Reports.

As MEPs 8 & 14 explain, the constituents rarely learn if their representatives have spoken or intervened in the various EP sessions.

> 'The constituents are not keen to start an exploring expedition in the traditional media, to discover what an MEP voted or how he/she responded or acted in the EP. Whenever I provide a detailed justification of my work in the Committees and the Plenary, the constituents seem receptive and happy to distribute this information further'. MEP8, 06/09/2016

SMPs then become valuable when used as informative mechanisms, which make the constituents aware of MEPs' work. MEPs themselves often feel obliged to provide details in the form of links or other information, which sometimes contradict or verify what is widely distributed in the press. As MEP14 suggests, through the use of informative links, the MEPs can publish their political interventions online, and the constituents can see in real time what MEPs do and think. In this way, SMPs are dynamically helping the direct (almost instant) transfer of views-ideas-news-events. For MEPs 10 & 19, the capacity to offer transparent information is one of the essential social media features, while MEP15 uses SMPs for a transparent presentation of who he/she is as a person. This is not happening within the scope of image improvement but as a

process of presenting views, ideas, facts and work completed. MEP4 has turned SMPs into a broadcasting medium, to disseminate news about activities, commentaries, statements, articles and other content for the purpose of greater transparency. A decision like this, according to MEP20, serves the unbiased briefing of the citizenry, constituting SMPs as accountability mechanisms of great supporting value. The value gained from SMPs is for MEP17 that he/she can clarify in detail his/her work in the EP, something imperative for policy-producing politicians who must explain EU policies to a broader audience and inevitably require more exposure to achieve this.

MEP21 goes a step further by considering his/her accountability scheme as one providing transparency via the participation of the constituents because he/she feels that it is the engagement of the public that puts pressure to the MEPs to offer extensive information online.

> 'The social demand generated by online groups and individuals increases the need for further transparency putting, the pressure to state governments, institutions like the EP and the representatives. Today more than ever, the agents of authority in a wider sense, must take into account these public pressures much more than in the past'. MEP21, 20/06/2017

In line with this argument, MEP12 acknowledges the existence of networked opinion leaders and social media influencers who promote the MEPs' views and activities to a broader audience, constituting SMPs as important contemporary accountability mechanisms. MEP23 agrees with the supportive character of social media and thinks that…

> 'The institutional or partisan measures taken to improve the transparency and accountability of the MEPs, are now complemented by SMPs, which offer increased visibility of the parliamentarians' work'. MEP23, 14/07/2017

To MEP24, the most crucial attribute of SMPs is to help the constituents receive information about the MEP activities and work in the EP. MEP24 expresses views online, disseminates information, takes the risk to contrast various rooted interests and so far is very satisfied with how SMPs facilitate these activities. As he/she claims, in the end, how an MEP promotes his/her activity online (in a neutral, favourable or even fake manner) is a matter of how the MEPs choose to present themselves to their audience.

> ‘This is a twofold process. It is an investment of trust from our side to the ability of the constituents to understand the importance of what we broadcast and on the other hand, an investment of public trust from the constituents to us, that whatever we broadcast is evidenced and verifiable’. MEP24, 18/07/2017

However, as MEP18 suggests, SMPs are controlled by those who use them. Therefore politicians disseminate information to the constituents in a 'controlled' or filtered manner. On the other hand, because of the variety of sources of information that exist today, politicians cannot avoid exposure related to actual and evidenced content in their broadcasts. MEP18 believes that the MEPs should aim to allow every constituent to access a full range of what an MEP does under the priority to offer practical, objective information about the issues that are at the forefront of consideration. Evidenced information will always be a good thing for transparency, even when it is not in the MEPs’ interest. The MEPs should not be interested in how the informational flow will be taken by constituents (positively or negatively) because social media is a means to fulfil the obligation to inform the public; it should not be a tool for electoral gains. Personal promotion is an acceptable feature as long as the MEPs give to accountability and transparency the majority of consideration. In the end, it is the balance of the mix that matters to MEP18.

5.2.2 Legitimation and duty

Most of the interviewed MEPs avoided linking social media accountability with the legitimation of their presence in Brussels. Only a few (6, 18, 21 and 16) were comfortable with the prospect of an indirect legitimation via social media accountability. MEP6 was receptive to the concept of legitimising his/her work in the EP by promoting it via SMPs but finds this not to be his/her number one priority.

> ‘If legitimation can stem from online transparency, then SMPs may become a proper legitimation tool, but right now, it is not my priority to use it as such’. MEP6, 05/09/2016

MEP18 agrees that the more an MEP is exposed in SMPs, the more transparent he/she becomes to the constituents, and this is prerequisite to become legitimate. In line with this requirement, MEP21 feels the need to inform the broader audience about EP activities and work, because the variety of topics discussed in the Committees, makes it

imperative that the arising policies and his/her contribution to them are disseminated to the constituents. In any case, MEP21 warns that it would be a mistake to think that having many followers and keeping in touch with them, is sufficient to legitimise actions, choices and views. MEP16 agrees that this is a frequent mistake that many MEPs make, i.e. they believe that by exploiting the advantages of SMPs to offer detailed information to constituents, they legitimise their actions and justify their role and contribution to the policies. This is not the case MEP21 thinks, because their purpose as representatives is legitimate only when they act for the benefit of the citizens. Therefore, until it can be ensured that the promoted policies are genuinely beneficial for the constituents or at least genuinely intending to produce value, we cannot ensure legitimation other than that of receiving the mandate (elections).

Indeed, to the majority of the interviewed MEPs, the only undisputed type of legitimation, is the one that stems from the European Election. It is a mandate with specific characteristics which is unrelated to the use of SMPs. Nevertheless, some MEPs think that an ethical legitimation is formulated with the use of SMPs. MEP10 believes that legitimation comes only from the voting citizens when they decide which MEPs to send to Brussels. The exchange of views with the constituents during online interactions and the dissemination of accountability information online can enrich this legitimation with sustainability. Legitimation, as MEP15 states, stems from making the constituents understand and acknowledge the MEPs' contribution to European integration. To MEP5, this is especially true when the MEPs publish their voting behaviour online and allow the constituents to follow the legislative process and interact on that basis. MEP8 does not think that SMPs legitimise the MEPs' role but…

> 'SMPs support the one thing that matters the most to my ethics and principles; to communicate and disseminate my work in the EP to the constituents'. MEP8, 06/09/2016

For several MEPs (10, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20 and 24) the choice to use SMPs to offer accountability information to the constituents is not a privilege, a trend or an opportunity, but a duty that has to be performed for the benefit of the constituents and a component of their role as representatives. Giving back extensive information about work in the EP, explaining in detail their actions and indicating how an MEP makes use

of the constituents' trust is seen by default as a duty. To MEPs 14 & 15 responding to constituents and providing answers and information online whenever asked, is not a mere broadcasting activity but the fulfilment of an accountability obligation for which MEPs should receive praise from the constituents. MEPs 19 & 20 consider the need to give feedback to the constituency with details of the work done in Brussels, as an 'undisputed obligation' and SMPs as only one of the available tools that support the dissemination of information to the constituents. MEP19 embraces any method which would strengthen accountability and prove the fulfilment of this duty (publishing working reports, votes, amendments etc.) while MEP20 supports the combination of SMPs with methods like printed summaries, brochures, articles etc. MEP12 considers accountability as a natural feature of SMPs.

> 'Our work is ongoing, the constituents must be aware of every aspect of it, and SMPs work in a synchronous and timely manner. The matching of these is self-evident'. MEP12, 06/09/2016

MEPs 18 & 10 consider as their representational duty towards the electorate, to explain and offer extensive information about the work in the EP and what the MEPs are doing in Brussels and Strasburg. Using SMPs to promote personal or party-group activities and topics related to their work is an indication of how they make good 'use' of the constituents' votes and enables constituents to assess their MEPs. To MEP24 the obligation to be accountable to the constituents is ethical more than anything else. The morality of this burden would motivate him/her to offer accountability information to the constituents, even if it was not seen as a formal obligation.

5.2.3 Consistency

One of the problems that representatives from crisis-inflicted countries face is that the application of the measures and consequent reforms that often are imposed on the societies as a result of EU solidarity, and require them to suggest, support or implement, ideas, views and measures which may not be consistent with their initial ideological, partisan or personal declarations. For example, MEPs 8 & 23 although not in a position to determine how much the crisis affected the views of other MEPs from their country, believe that the crisis can affect consistency for those politicians, who are not able to maintain a stable public presence and speech. The interviewed MEPs agree that within

a crisis scenery, the rapidly changing developments can cause arguments or commitments expressed in previous instances, to become invalid. The inconsistency between words and actions is one of the prevalent accusations that an MEP can face by the constituents during the duration of service. One-third of the interviewed MEPs (1, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13 and 23), view themselves as being consistent towards their constituents. They base this judgement upon their claim that they use SMPs to promote their activities and broadcast a transparent, accountable and verifiable message.

Some MEPs who consider consistency as a feature already possessed, think that the reproduction of traditional media content in social media is a parameter supported by SMPs. MEP1 claims that consistency derives from his/her public social media presence, where the views expressed in SMPs are always identical with those expressed offline. Similarly, MEP13 feels that during the crisis SMPs have helped to preserve the standpoints with consistency through the repetition of his/her views and activities, so the message has always been unchanged inside and outside SMPs.

> 'An easy way to ensure a good level of consistency is to promote party positions more than personal positions. SMPs have the capacity to facilitate the communication of these positions as a secure way to maintain a steadily transmitted message'. MEP13, 06/09/2016

MEP12 pays attention to keeping a steady method of publishing material, both online and offline and maintaining a structured approach to the crisis. This approach is consistently verified by his/her presence in the EP, the speeches, the interviews, the broadcasting activities and equally the social media posts. Others like MEPs 8 & 3 feel that consistency is also coming through a unique distinct political message with actions and ideas broadcasted both in traditional media and social media within the challenging crisis scenery. MEP10 is confident that his/her social media accounts have been consistent because he/she has been openly challenging the view that the crisis is a window of opportunity for change and reform. The MEP's dedication to this idea has distanced him/her from populist suggestions or voices proposing Eurosceptic solutions, establishing a transparent and distinct position which cannot be misrepresented. In the same manner, MEP23 believes that offering online accountability information related to the standpoints about the administrative measures for economic recovery, supports a clear message which is consistent with his/her views offline and online.

The majority of the interviewed MEPs view the synchronous character of social media as especially helpful in enhancing their public presence consistently, by verifying their claims and actions through more than a single communicational method. This is true even for the MEPs who do not feel generally bound by public activities or statements of the past and prefer to be loyal to their principles, for which they believe that they have been elected. MEP1 is one of those MEPs and by having endured sanctions in the past (as a national MP who was expelled from the party after publically disagreeing with the austerity reforms), thinks that being consistent with personal principles is more important than following partisan directives. As MEP12 claims…

> 'When the MEPs are in a position to explain to the constituents online how they reached a decision, they clarify the expressed views promptly, avoiding claims and allegations from manipulative opponents who try to distort his/her message'. MEP12, 06/09/2016

The tweet analysis reveals that the MEPs use a series of non-EP related avenues to prove or improve their consistent character. By promoting online or press articles they have written, commentaries on the EU developments, interviews and appearances in mainstream media, Press Releases, Statement with critique and finally references to partisan declarations, the MEPs try to enhance their profile as consistent non-deviating politicians. These tweet categories account for 32% of the accountability tweets with the interviews being the most frequent point of reference.

5.2.4 Self-assessment

The capacity of the constituents to appraise the elected MEPs during their term of service emerged as an incentive for the MEPs to use SMPs to establish processes of self-appraisal and evaluation of their work. Some MEPs (7, 8, 13, 15 and 17), believe that the extensive use of technology creates more opportunities for the constituents to assess their representatives and express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction before the election day. To these MEPs, the benefit of knowing in advance what constituents think is that they have time to recalibrate their course and improve their performance in the eyes of their voters. MEP7 believes that SMPs create the conditions for the constituents to

evaluate their representatives objectively. By fulfilling the undisputed need to offer accountability information online, SMPs facilitate the incentives for interaction and the MEPs' assessment by the constituents in a timely manner. Regarding these online interactions, MEPs 8, 13 and 15 think that the more the constituents (at least those who communicate regularly to get informed) receive information that helps them provide their critique, the higher the degree of MEP self-awareness because the MEPs can realise their mistakes and become better representatives.

> 'The feedback received online from constituents, and their impression of how well I perform is a clear indication of the constituents' intentions in the forthcoming election'. MEP13, 06/09/2016

To MEP15 this information can be used to reassess MEP priorities during the midterm. As a result, the one-way broadcasting methods used by some MEPs become insufficient. MEP15 prefers to receive feedback which contributes to the appraisal of the work done so far. This feedback nevertheless, is not offered by default and MEP17 admits that sometimes the criticism received online is not constructive or helpful for MEPs to understand precisely where and how they need to improve.

The potential of SMPs to function as appraisal mechanisms is exploited in a more 'industrial' manner by a small number of MEPs (2, 10, 14 and 22). For evaluation purposes, MEP10 and his/her team of associates, have established an internal revision process, to create milestones and assess the MEP's overall performance. MEP10 has put in place an internal accountability process for the first half of the service and any later decisions about how to behave online in the future, are based upon accumulated experience and upon what needs to be amended according to constituents' expectations. It seems nevertheless that the dedication of the MEPs in processes of self-appraisal is still insignificant as only 38 instances (in a total of 3357) were located as relevant to this category in the tweet analysis. MEP14 also claims to have established a mid-term review process and using SMPs proves very useful during the reviewing intervals, for the dissemination of accountability information about his/her work. MEP2, on the other hand, thinks that the constituents do not evaluate the MEPs based on their actual work and their contributions in the EP.

> 'The EP is an introvert organisation, and it is harder to offer accountability information to the constituents in comparison to national MPs'.
>
> MEP2 13/07/2016

Feeling that his/her usefulness or productivity is difficult to be proved to the average constituent, MEP2 pays more attention to the public judgement which is influenced by the 'big picture' and the overall impressions he/she creates. MEP2 is not interested in the impression created by actions, policies and processes within the EP, but in the popularity, he/she receives for addressing the critical European issues and challenges. MEP22 supports this argument, by adding that there are electronic platforms exogenous to the EP, which offer evaluations of the MEPs' work and rank the MEPs without taking into account their actual activity.

> 'Some platforms use statistics that offer false impressions to the public. Some MEPs appear to be low in the overall rankings, not because they are unproductive or bad at their work by but because of other internal EP parameters which affect their performance. For example, how can you evaluate an MEP who has never been assigned as Rapporteur?'
>
> MEP22, 11/07/2017

The distorted ranking offered this way to the constituents is consequently affecting the way some MEPs construct their profile online and offline to amend these false impressions.

5.3 Accountability strategies

The interviewed MEPs indicated a set of motivations related to accountability that make them indulge in the benefits of SMPs. Many of them expressed the desire to experience more significant interaction with their constituents and stated their determination to work towards minimising the physical and emotional distance. The capacity of SMPs to facilitate this aspiration is associated with the advantages of SMPs, and most of the interviewed MEPs demonstrated an optimistic view of the accountability potential of online platforms, especially in relation to traditional media. Following their motivations, the MEPs proclaimed a set of strategic approaches while they use SMPs: bi-directional interactive use, evidencing work through informational repositories, committing online

for future action/legislation work, combining SMPs with other interactive methods for better results.

5.3.1 Bi-directional communication

As noted in chapter 5.2, many MEPs see the importance of social media broadcasts in their capacity to provide information which makes MEPs more accountable. In fact, a group of interviewed MEPs (3, 4, 5, 6, 14, 17, 20, and 23) acknowledge the importance of strategically transmitting informative broadcasts to the constituents. A great deal of MEP3's effort is to provide as much information as possible for the issues that he/she considers necessary. Using SMPs is not about bombarding the constituents with details of the MEPs diary (daily events/meetings); it is about disseminating views and actions which are essential to the broader audience. To MEP5, SMPs are more useful to break the news about political developments and to provide links that constituents can use to check related information and create their overall understanding of the issues.

> 'The SMPs are informative mediums. Accountability in the SMPs means that the constituents receive the knowledge they need to become capable of formulating their own opinions'. MEP5, 31/08/2016

MEP4 is mostly using his/her social media accounts to share information with the constituents and the people he/she liaises with. MEP4 thinks it is more important to share information online about significant developments and clearly state to the constituents what the policies are about.

> 'The SMPs are good at informing the constituents and explaining to them how the policies work or how they have been developed at the party level or the Committees'. MEP4, 31/08/2016

MEP14 thinks that SMPs are generally helpful for everyday people to gain access to different views and information by using their laptops, tablets or smartphones and through SMPs, the MEPs can offer facts and evidence of what happens in the EU. MEP17 uses SMPs as a route to provide direct information to the constituents and values Twitter as a means that promotes directedness, authenticity and spontaneity. The SMPs' value as MEP20 says is mostly in providing alternative information which helps to update the expectations of the constituents towards more realistic outcomes about the EU and the Eurozone. MEP6 disseminates information targeted to constituents about his/her

activities, explaining what happens with issues related to his/her line of work (e.g. consumer rights, etc.). MEP23 uses SMPs to raise awareness around specific issues or to provide further clarification on legislation to prepare the constituents about the effects of forthcoming EU regulation. The scope of the SMPs should focus upon the provision of information about the policies, legislation and MEP activities.

Acknowledging SMPs as broadcasting tools can be a point of reference for both participating sides, constituents and MEPs respectively. The MEPs can, of course, use SMPs to broadcast a variety of information and viewpoints to their recipients. However, as a series of MEPs (3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 19, 21, 22 and 24) suggested, the constituents themselves can also assume the role of the broadcaster and use the same platforms not only to respond to MEP approaches but also to transmit views, preferences and ideas on their own, constituting new informational sets for the MEPs. In this way, SMPs become bi-directional channels and a new source of information for the MEPs. Most MEPs like MEP4 began to use SMPs as informational tools to access news instantly, i.e. used as a media stream and not for the sake of social interaction. MEP10 also started using social media not for commentary purposes but as a tool to access more news.

Nevertheless, soon the MEPs realised as MEP13 explains that when constituents comment on the various issues and provide new information by uploading material, giving links or mentioning examples, then this online feedback can turn the platform into an informational channel for the benefit of the MEPs. MEP3 admits that sometimes the constituents' contribution when gathering information about an issue is imperative because things are much more complicated in real life. As MEP5 thinks, Twitter, in particular, is beneficial to keep in touch and up to date with the developments, and it resembles a live coverage of the daily incidents. Moreover, MEP12 agrees that SMPs are helpful for the information of the constituents about what the EP is doing, but at the same time, SMPs help the MEPs to see what other colleagues (MEPs) are doing and to familiarise with their views.

MEP19 uses SMPs to discover online sources of information which would not otherwise be spotted. The value of SMPs for the dissemination of news and information to the MEPs themselves is a function of great importance as MEP21 stresses because MEPs

have a hectic schedule and minimal time to get acquainted with the latest political developments. MEP22 follows a standardised process, which is to access SMPs once a week to gather news and information before deciding what to post. Unfortunately, as MEP24 notes, both the MEPs and the constituents must remember that SMPs today is indeed a significant source of information, but it is not the only existing or the most credible one. Thus the information-set or the information source can be very narrow.

> 'Many constituents do not bother to hear the news or read papers because they expect to learn everything from SMPs simply by following a couple of accounts. What is even worse is that they think that they have learned everything they need to know and formulate their views accordingly. This is a mistake that turns SMPs into narrow-minded tools which restrict rational thinking'. MEP24, 18/07/2017

Based on the previous argument, a group of MEPs (4, 10, 11, 14, 17, 19, 23 and 24) proclaimed the establishment of an interactional scenery as more strategically important based on the more active participation of the constituents. MEP11 supports that offering new knowledge to the constituents will bring more counter-action from their side. To MEP11, it would be ideal if constituents could virtually participate in the Committee meetings to understand what is discussed there and offer their commentary.

> 'The constituents need a reason to engage and express themselves. If we want the constituents to be productive and engaging, we must first offer them the incentive to search further and deeper. The SMPs are the mediums which can fulfil this aspiration'. MEP11, 06/09/2016

The reason why MEP24 is very willing to engage with the constituents is that they are bringing a new wealth of knowledge and suggestions that MEPs may not receive elsewhere. MEP24 finds it very productive and beneficial to exchange information with constituents and work together with them over the issues, and this is a result of online individualised interactions in the social media accounts (e.g. constituents informed the MEP about a confidential Commission report which he/she then officially requested to be handed to him/her). MEP4, on the other hand, admits and regrets that he is not interacting online as much as he/she feels he/she should. His/her contact with constituents is one-directional, characterised by broadcasting or disseminating information while constituents simply comment. There is no initiation of synchronous

engagement, but MEP4 feels this should be the next strategic step because it is what people want. MEP14 thinks that constituents are thirsty for fact-based information.

> 'I receive requests all the time from my constituents to tell them more about decisions taken in the Committees. They want to learn the details of the discussions. I think they want to know who is truly working for them'.
> MEP14, 31/01/2017

MEP17 receives many comments about his/her work in the EP from constituents who express remarks of a positive or negative impression, especially in Twitter. That is why MEP19 is using both Twitter and Facebook complementary, Facebook mostly to publically comment on news and developments and Twitter to address the constituents or interact with journalists and experts. MEP10 is strategically using SMPs as a professional tool.

> 'My intention is to learn what people think about my views and arguments. When I disseminate my thoughts, positions and activities, I expect to receive comments and feedback. Of course, I take for granted that much of it will be contradictive, and sometimes this becomes frustrating, but I am not there to give speeches without getting anything back'. MEP10, 06/09/2016

MEP23 is reluctant to pursue further online discussions because many opposing views exist simultaneously within the SMPs and feels that an extensive or unjustified debate online would not offer substantial accountability benefits.

5.3.2 Work repositories

Some of the interviewed MEPs (6, 12, 17, 19, 20, 23 and 24) follow a practical approach to the use of SMPs, exploiting their technological advantages as potentials for storage and reproduction of content. MEPs 6 & 23 use their social media accounts partially as repositories or 'warehouses' for the distribution of content or links. This content is considered necessary for dissemination or promotion, relevant to the topics addressed in the Committees or of general interest to the constituents. The tweet analysis designated the use of Links to social and traditional media as the most usual way to access or disseminate accountability information with 405 relevant tweets (16%). The reproduction of image/sound/recordings online is not vastly used (only 33 cases) while giving access to non-Plenary speeches given at events was also not very popular (21 cases). MEP6 feels obliged to publish this way several pieces, content and interviews

which evidence his/her activities because the constituents find this content more comfortable to use and retweet/republish. MEP24 uses mostly Facebook as a broadcasting repository for press releases, articles, speeches, videos and policy proposals which evidence the activities, events and interventions at the EP. MEP17 adopted the idea of a fan-page account where he/she could post information about work, initiatives, reports and activities in the Committees and the Plenary. As a result of noise and trolling, his/her initial desire to interact turned into the necessity to offer accountability content online. Since then, he/she tries to highlight topics of interest by uploading to the social media accounts short videos of Plenary speeches and press articles. Using SMPs as repositories are helpful to provide content that justifies his/her work and interests. On the other hand, MEP20 is reluctant to the idea of using SMPs as a forwarding mechanism towards other means of contact.

> 'The constituents can always contact me via email or get detailed information from my personal webpage. I feel that there is no need for excessive involvement'. MEP20, 07/06/2017

An interesting point comes from MEP12, who finds SMPs very useful as electronic databases. MEP12 uses SMPs as a repository of content (speeches, links, declarations, interviews, statements, etc.) which may be used in other media interventions. MEP12 is using a strategy where Facebook content is copied to Twitter, which acts as a repository for the opinion pieces he/she writes. Eventually whoever accesses the Twitter account will end up to the Facebook posts. Moreover, much of the uploaded content is not for the constituents but for the MEP him/herself to remain stored and be accessed at a later time. This is MEP12's effort to pursue an accountable consistency by keeping track of what he/she says or does. In other words, SMPs function like a library of information, available 24hours per day to be accessed. Similarly, MEP19 uses SMPs as tools to maintain a visual record of MEP activities like in the form of an e-diary. In fact, this works as evidence of work and proof towards constituents that the MEP is working effectively. From MEP19's viewpoint, what prevails today in SMPs is a combination of accountability offerings from the MEPs and sentiment expression from constituents. The MEPs need to be able to provide evidence of their activities and actions. Keeping an online public diary with records of these is often the best way to respond to the constituents who challenge or question what the MEP has done in the past. This is further justified by the

upload of 166 tweets related to the category 'Info', which represents evidence that can be found on the MEPs' accounts about the EP processes they took part in.

5.3.3 Committing online

For a considerable number of MEPs, their behaviour in SMPs becomes related to accountability when it is associated with committing online, as a result of the audience's request (or demand) to do so. The strategy of the MEPs related to the use of SMPs for public committing depends on the willingness of the MEPs to accept or reject constituents' requests or to be proactively accountable by proclaiming their stance. There is a group of MEPs who are very positive and willing to have a committing strategy in place, providing information about future behaviour, not necessarily as a means of alignment with their audience but as an expression of their dedication to transparency and openness. Meanwhile, several MEPs are sceptical or even reluctant to commit online, but they nevertheless acknowledge the possibility that this may be an unavoidable occurrence during their online endeavours in SMPs.

The tweet analysis designated a series of categories of tweets, published to clarify the MEPs' position on the matters that interest the body of online followers. Some of these demonstrate the official declaration of MEP commitments like EP interventions, official press releases, official statements and obviously the formal votes. These are formal categories which clarify where the MEPs stand on the various issues and also become historical points of reference for the constituents in the MEPs' accounts. The previous categories account for about 400 tweets from the total sample of Accountability tweets (see Table 5 – Appendix 6). There are also other informal expressions of commitment like commentaries, live broadcasts of activities, mutual activities with other colleagues to support a cause and public updates on the ongoing issues. These account for only 230 tweets. This means that the MEPs prefer to follow the more official pathways to making online commitments because these give a more formal aura to their statements, a sign that they are not afraid to take clear positions in front of their audience, even in a landscape where prejudice and confrontation are still overwhelming.

In principle, some MEPs claim to have experienced receiving persistent requests to commit online and felt obliged to respond. These MEPs (1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 21 and 19) consider the potential of online committing as part of their normal behaviour in SMPs. Constituents usually contact MEP19 online with specific requests, but quite often they ask him/her to declare a voting preference or to commit to specific actions. This is more often during the 'big' votes in the EP for popular issues as MEPs 8 & 19 confirm. By finding SMPs more convenient than using emails, the constituents prefer to engage this way more than before, and MEP19 responds positively. MEP8 is also open and positive to public online committing. He/she has committed publically in the past deviating from the party line and has experienced what it means to receive online threats and extortion by the harassing trolls.

> 'I am never afraid to express my views publically. All MEPs should feel free to commit and support a view willingly, either online or inside the Committees, the Plenary or during public speeches and activities. When you are generally consistent with other media declarations, then committing online should be seen as nothing more than performing an anticipated behaviour'.
>
> MEP8, 06/09/2016

MEP10 is also very willing to commit online for issues that he/she feels strongly about, even if his/her party has a different position, e.g. MEP10 will never vote to grant visas to Turkish citizens until Turkey fulfils all of the criteria set by the EU. Committing online is something that MEP21 has been doing openly for two reasons. The first reason is to be consistent with his/her duty to disseminate accountability information so that constituents who cannot have physical contact will become informed citizens. The second reason is the desire to bridge the gap with the constituents who deliberately keep their distance from politics and to bring them closer to their representative. MEP1 has been requested online to take clear positions on specific issues and finds this to be another feature of SMPs that is associated with accountability. This is especially true in the case of those European policies which deviate from what is domestically considered to be the national interest.

> 'Having greater flexibility in the EP group than a national MP in the national party, I may find myself in a situation of conflict between my personal view and the party view. Eventually, this may affect my voting. The constituents may not understand this deviation at first, but I can always interact online to explain the situation and clarify my decision'. MEP1, 12/07/2016

MEP4 is not feeling that committing online about a specific behaviour is compulsory. He/she has been committing online about particular actions but not as detailed as he/she would do in traditional media or during a face-to-face conversation. It is only the significant issues (e.g. TTIP) which may be discussed online and only in their broad sense, not the detailed technicalities of the amendments.

> 'The constituents cannot understand the technical issues or terms surrounding the amendments, the questions or the reports. As a result, the only type of committing that can take place online is in accordance with a set of general principles; not one that refers to specific actions by the MEPs or votes in the EP'. MEP4, 31/08/2016

Whenever approached, MEP5 offers explanations about the choices he/she makes and forwards the constituents to sources which justify his/her positions. MEP5 is willing to commit online for future legislative behaviour, mostly for those issues where there is an overall consent between the party, the EP group and the personal view. That is because he/she is not willing to embark upon endless online disputes with those who disagree. This is MP5's strategy to control the context of the interaction, hoping that constituents will appreciate becoming more informed and educated.

A small number of MEPs view committing online with scepticism and cautiousness suggesting problems of principle or practicality. MEP3 considers online committing as a type of allowance that MEPs grant to their constituents, not as a binding obligation related to the MEP role. This is because he/she feels that the MEPs are obliged only towards their conscience and choose how to vote or act according to their personal judgement (as in the case of a trustee). The MEPs always have to take into account what their party thinks or what the constituents suggest, but in case of a conflict, the MEPs should decide independently. Expanding this parameter, MEP11 claims that MEPs do not have to follow what the constituents say. The MEPs may receive constituents' contributions to shaping a view, but most of the time, they have formulated their position in advance. MEP11 always follows his/her personal judgement and not what social media audience may say online. This is because the MEPs' obligation is to represent constituents in the best possible way based upon a judgement which is distant from personal interests or gains.

> 'I have not yet received any serious online requests to commit to specific votes, but even if I had, it is not practical to discuss a forthcoming vote online.

> Very often we receive voting documentation shortly before the vote takes place. It would be challenging to collect or filter a suggestion or an aggregate view from the bulk of the constituents in such short notice before voting'.
> MEP11, 06/09/2016

MEP6 is not negative towards committing online about policies which are to become legislation but just like MEP11, foresees objective difficulties. He/she reveals that most MEPs are not always 100% aware of the issues that are discussed within all of the various Committees. Each MEP has expertise related to the Committees he/she belongs to. For the rest of the issues, the MEPs are obliged to rely upon the knowledge or expertise of their fellow MEPs from the same country, especially those from the same party.

> 'When it comes to voting, it is true that for topics that I am not entirely aware of, I rely upon my colleagues from the same party. Although our votes may differ from time to time, on average, we vote as a group. Committing online is a process which cannot be easily accommodated on the spot during synchronous interactions before I consult with my fellow MEPs'.
> MEP6, 05/09/2016

In practice, MEP6 receives messages and approaches from the constituents asking him/her to vote and promote specific legislation. These messages increase right before the day of the vote, and they are usually coming from non-supporters who are opposing his/her standpoints and want to express this opposition quite often by becoming abusive. They are not interested in an honest discussion and try to stir online fuss. Responding to them is seen by MEP6 as a waste of time because there is no openness or intention from their side to listen to arguments and be persuaded.

Finally, a few other MEPs (20, 22, 23 and 24) are in practice opposed to the idea of committing online although they understand that the constituents feel the need to request declarations of commitment because of their lack of trust. MEP20 is one of the MEPs who avoids assuming any commitment online, especially for issues related to voting for the legislation. He/she finds no point into proclaiming his stance before the vote, simply because his/her legislative behaviour can be easily anticipated from the views and positions he/she stands for.

> 'If I commit online in advance of a vote in the EP, it would look as if I am advertising my intentions or as if I am using the SMPs to attract extra publicity. I am not looking to strengthen my arguments this way. After the

> vote takes place and if my stance remains ambiguous to the eyes of the constituents, then I am willing to offer further explanations and justification of my voting behaviour online'. MEP20, 07/06/2017

MEP22 feels that he/she has only one commitment, and that is the commitment towards the global community and the protection of human rights. The constituents who are aware of this do not expect any online renewal of political commitments. Thus committing online in SMPs or repeating the dedication to the MEP's duties, has value only to those who do not bother to know MEP22's background; and those are not constituents that MEP22 would like to represent in the first place. MEP24 is not keen to commit online about specific votes in the EP and has not done so yet. On the other hand, the followers in SMPs have not expressed such a demand either, only generic suggestions about how to promote specific issues. MEP23 is reluctant to commit to policy action after an online discussion or a recommendation coming from the constituents. What constituents say during online interactions, can partially contribute to the formulation of a view or the shaping of a policy, but usually, this requires more than just one discussion to take place. Committing online should not be a one-off spontaneous broadcast but the result of an ongoing process.

5.3.4 Complementarity

The tendency of many MEPs to prioritise the use of SMPs to fulfil their accountability strategy does not make them neglect the importance of more physical means of communication. Some MEPs (1, 6, 9, 15, and 18) are sceptical of the idea of relying upon the charismas of virtual networks, and their scepticism imposes the need for a combination of other interactive methods. MEP6 considers going back to the constituency once every week as the best way to spread the message about what happens in the EU and to explain to constituents what the MEPs are doing in Brussels. As MEP1 stresses, the means and methods of accountability is a personal choice, but SMPs are not efficient on their own. SMPs are just a type of democratic facilitators which have their own limitations. Regarding these limitations, MEP15 favours more the physical contact with constituents and visits the constituency frequently to interact with the public.

> ‘Among my supporting base, age and IT familiarity are two important parameters which can limit the participation of a large part of the electorate in online interactions. If they cannot approach me through SMPs, then I feel obliged to approach them physically’. MEP15, 02/02/2017

MEP9, on the other hand, claims to be offering accountability information with both physical and virtual methods.

> ‘Apart from the social media posts and the physical tours in the constituency, I find it useful to send group emails to the followers who enrol in my webpage. I also enjoy posting online articles and videos that I prepare on various topics, and they are reproduced in blogs or online newspapers’. MEP9, 06/09/2016

MEP18, although initially believed that personal contact with constituents was necessary and the SMPs were narrowing the chances of personal touch, eventually realised that there should be a balance between the two.

> ‘Physical communication needs to be complemented by social media communication because with SMPs, you can reach audiences not normally reached through personal contact’. MEP18, 22/05/2017

The complementarity of the various approaches has led MEPs 24 & 21 to introduce a more systematic method. MEP24 is using both traditional media and social media in a complementary way with mutual counter-feedback between the two. He/she writes a newspaper column, appears on TV whenever possible and uses SMPs as part of a mixed approach. This approach breaks into many layers and communication routes and ensures that his/her work and views are disseminated adequately to a broad audience. Similarly, MEP21 uses SMPs as part of an extensive accountability scheme which involves physical tours and visits around the constituency. Some of the physical gatherings organised engage 400-500 participants (usually supporters), and the MEP sees this process as a representational duty that has to be performed. In this scheme, the role of SMPs is crucial because it ensures that all constituents (not only those attending) will have the opportunity to learn about the MEP’s work by using the live-feed features of the SMPs and the broadcasting of constituency events.

> ‘The SMPs cannot entirely replace physical or face-to-face communication with the constituents or stand as the sole method of interactivity with the public. Nevertheless, these platforms are fine as complementary tools which assist me in my overall effort to be accountable’. MEP21, 20/06/2017

The tweet analysis designated some categories which reveal that MEPs' physical presence is another method to complement their virtual efforts to disseminate accountable information to the constituents. The MEPs attend events, have meetings, participate in partisan activities and often give speeches where they express views, clarify concepts and take positions under live coverage. Then they publish relevant information on their SMP accounts to make their message be broadcasted widely. There are 328 such tweets which refer to non-virtual (some would say old-school) activities that MEPs feel the need to reproduce online as an indication of their busy involvement and regular working schedule.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter tried to designate what motivates the MEPs to offer accountable information online and how they materialise these motivations. The focus of the chapter was also on determining whether the MEPs' perceptions are strictly related to the fulfilment of representation duties or whether they relate to intentions which have a brand-building character and a gap-bridging effect with reference to the Selection Model. The chapter started by presenting the main MEP motivations which are to improve transparency, to pursue an ethical legitimation by fulfilling duties, to ensure that in a time of unfulfilled promises the message broadcasted is consistent and eventually to proceed to self-improvement activities by reviewing performance. Then the chapter continued with the strategies the MEPs apply online like using the SMPs as bi-directional information channels and repositories of work evidence, committing online for future voting or other behaviour and exploiting the SMP benefits in parallel with physical or mainstream methods of interaction. The tweet analysis results were disseminated within the findings after categorising MEPs' online activities to strengthen some of the presented arguments.

CHAPTER 6 - PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE POLICY DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The MEPs are vital actors of the policy design process which takes place within the EP Committees and also essential factors for the materialisation of EU legislation after the enhanced role of the EP in the post-Lisbon era. Apart from the anticipated stance that their partisan or party-group induction suggests, the MEPs as declared during the interviews, consider themselves more 'flexible' in comparison to national MPs, when it comes to shaping, formulating, discussing or even voting for the EU policies. As previously seen in chapter two, in a landscape of disengagement and reluctance exacerbated by crisis and austerity measures, the literature initially suggested that the reconnection of the European public with their representatives entails a more participatory involvement in the policy-making process or at least a greater understanding of the logistics of this process. During the last few years the MEPs themselves, tend to exploit all available means to communicate to the constituents their views and stances on proposed legislation. Since SMPs became a field of active involvement where MEPs manage publically available online profiles, constituents have more opportunities to embark upon online interactions with the MEPs. This chapter intends to determine the motivations of the MEPs from the chosen crisis-inflicted states and how they direct their online strategy and behaviour in relation to policy discussions. Among other, the chapter addresses issues like whether MEPs' motivations facilitate, encourage or deflect public online discussions, how the virtual sphere affects the discussions, what are the tendencies of the MEPs when interacting with constituents, if the MEPs consider existing SMPs to be adequate, whether they believe that policy discussion is met with indifference from the public and how willing the MEPs are to collect and use constituents suggestions or proposals. The chapter begins with a presentation of the main motivations that MEPs claim to have when they interact online for policy discussion purposes, accompanied by the strategies they apply. Analysing the tweets of the PD theme creates a clearer picture of the level of interaction between the MEPs and constituents over policy issues. A total of 2904 tweets were allocated to this theme as Policy Discussion tweets (PD). Table 6 – APPENDIX VI gives a full break down of the categories.

6.2 Policy discussion motivations

The capacity of SMPs as communicational mediums allows the MEPs to use them as a means to explain their political positions, disseminate justifications for their views and to persuade the constituents about their intentions. However, as the MEPs claim, their audience is often bypassing and neglecting posts which resemble one-way statements or interventions similar to those of the mainstream media. Consequently, the static broadcasting of explanatory positions may not be adequate to spark an engaging interaction. The interviews with the MEPs reveal a series of motivations for higher interactive online behaviour and evidence of MEPs' intention for more active engagement with the audience.

6.2.1 Views justification

Most of the interviewed MEPs demonstrated the tendency to support and encourage political dialogue through SMPs. One motivation behind this is that with online discussions, it becomes easier for the MEPs to clarify and justify their positions on the various issues. This entails more than a broadcasting behaviour in the form of statements because the MEPs believe that by receiving feedback from constituents and providing clarifications upon that feedback, they can present the viewpoints in more detail. In practice, though, the extent of interactivity that the interviewed MEPs have experienced varies. The tweet analysis indicates that the relevant category (Conversation) contains 149 relevant tweets related to policy conversations that extend beyond the exchange of just two messages. Moreover, there have only been two instances where the constituents were asked by MEPs to participate in off-line private discussions about the policies (category Redirect).

MEP8 has experienced a small but steadily growing amount of online interactions associated with the topics broadcasted in the SMP accounts, and MEP23 had a few opportunities for dialogue feeling that some hazy discussion for the important EU issues already takes place. In contrast, MEPs 1 & 21 think that the amount of policy discussion is only a small minority within the abundance of online activity. As MEP10 estimates, the

percentage of interactions, short statements and one-way commentaries, is collectively below 30% of the total social media activity (actual policy dialogue is much less), whereas 70% of the content is static informational broadcasts.

> 'Considering the total amount of online activity, it is debatable and questionable how much of the existing interactivity represent fruitful dialogues with the constituents and comprehensive policy discussions'. MEP10, 06/09/2016

Similarly, MEP9's anticipation of more extensive online interactivity with the constituents has been refuted, and the feedback received by constituents is minimal, with only a handful of them engaging in dialogues. MEP3 states that he/she has not experienced any form of online conversation so far and the constituents correspondence to his/her online presence, is only in the form of likes and short-phrase comments. MEP17 had the initial motivation to maintain an open/accessible social media profile where constituents would be encouraged to contribute within an interactive mode where views and policies would be clearly explained. Being an MEP who is not favouring short phrases of impression, it soon became apparent that

> 'the good ideas of the few are getting lost within an ocean of noise and confrontation'. MEP17, 11/05/2017

As a result, many MEPs became sceptical about the potential of SMPs for substantial discussion of the issues and therefore for their capacity to clarify their political positions. This is also demonstrated by the small portion of tweets related to MEPs asking their constituents to suggest ideas and proposals for the EU policies. Only 15 tweets in the category (Ask) related to the MEPs initiative to request contributions. MEP8 finds it very ambitious to expect to sustain a substantial dialogue via SMPs and is somewhat reserved with SMPs' capabilities. He/she also believes that in the minds of most MEPs, SMPs are only a method for image promotion rather than a method for the clarification of political arguments. As MEP20 explains

> 'The SMPs can only facilitate a fragmented exchange of impression-generating discourse. They promote superficial impressions, which hamper any attempt to converge opposing opinions. There is no presence of the principles of deliberation, and we should not assign SMPs with the responsibility of political dialogue'. MEP20, 07/06/2017

As MEP16 states, the constituents are not demonstrating genuine interest for politics because their participation is exhausted in reactions limited to 'likes' which are not providing any political substance. This lack of constructive feedback from the constituents is what makes MEP9 consider SMPs as an inappropriate tool for discussion activities. In their efforts for more interaction online, the MEPs should also acknowledge some prominent dangers, one of them being as MEP5 suggests, that it is mostly the loyal follower base of supporters that interact and not necessarily the neutral or the undecided. For the same reason, MEP19 thinks that interacting with the constituents for discussion of the issues, is a feature that can perhaps be explored at a later stage of social media evolution.

> 'At the moment, we must keep in mind that social media is more like a bubble, definitely not a window to the whole society. This bubble is more associated with impressions than it is with substance'. MEP19, 30/05/2017

In this direction, MEP24 reminds the scenario where the constituents may only want to interact with the MEPs to get their 5 minutes of public attention, without caring about providing any real contribution.

Although the initial experience has not produced highly promising results, several MEPs are still willing to explore the possibility of more significant policy discussion online, emphasising the individualised character of political communication that takes place in SMPs. MEP13 has an almost ideological approach towards unmediated one-to-one communication, thinking that online interaction is not as fragmented as it seems and can draw the full picture of what someone thinks. Direct contact is seen as the ultimate method of free expression. MEP1 insists that bidirectional online exchanges should be more facilitated than one-direction broadcasts, although this is a task that requires maturity, character and proper training. MEP10 is prioritising the potential of exchanging views and ideas with constituents about the EU policies, while MEP16 is focusing on the search for constituent feedback and uses his/her broadcasts as an opportunity to provoke the expression of many different views. MEP3 understands that maintaining an open public dialogue online is a generally demanding task with unproven feasibility but is willing to explore this potential during a routine timeframe which is not congested with political events that affect the bias of online discourse. Although the average percentage of real policy dialogue is unanimously thought to be small, MEPs

21&24 think that the MEPs must overlook the unworthy suggestions and keep focusing on discovering those few quality contributions.

> 'The most productive function of SMPs are the few instances of public discussion, during which I can clarify my views and receive public and private comments and suggestions. So far, there have been a few useful discussions with the constituents online, and I expect even more in the future'. MEP24, 18/07/2017

MEP5 generally thinks that SMP interactions are an excellent method for the MEPs to maintain contact with the constituents and promote their viewpoints extensively, so that in time they may become consolidated as the accepted views at the local or national level. Another positive is that by openly allowing reactions and views, the views of minorities also find their way into this process so that no constituent will feel excluded. The same argument is justifying some of the MEPs' 3&8 priorities when they claim that they intend to pursue more extensive dialogic interactions in the future.

6.2.2 Monitoring and influencing public opinion

Several MEPs focus upon collecting the constituents' views to understand the direction of public opinion for the significant issues. MEP9 is currently using SMPs for two purposes, i.e. receiving constituents' opinions about the diverse range of European issues and making an overall sense of public opinion. The tweet analysis reflects that this claim is only theoretical. MEP18's choice to get that sense via SMPs, was on some level inevitable because representatives who come from small and distant countries do not have many opportunities to visit the constituency and keep in touch with the public. Therefore, the importance of SMPs for the collection of constituent views is a feature that must never be abandoned or neglected. That is why MEP16 has as a priority to collect public opinion to get as much feedback as possible about what constituents think about the EU policies. To MEPs 8 & 16, social media is not a holistic approach to the electorate; nevertheless, being aware of grasping the public sense can be very beneficial. MEP8 thinks it is imperative for the MEPs to know what constituents think because having the full perspective of constituents' needs expressed openly is vital for the formulation of appropriate policies. MEPs 6, 11 and 21 are fascinated by the capacity of SMPs to collect public opinion (agreeing or opposing) from numerous

citizens/actors/agents in any place or time. MEP21 feels that the collection of public views or suggestions, is one of the most critical features of SMPs today and he/she always tries to provoke discussions, in order to collect the public feeling. He/she is confident that using SMPs has become a vital part of the MEPs' activity, as a means to collect the public sense with minimal effort and cost. MEP11 believes that all MEPs will eventually need to invest more resources in the use of SMPs because this is the simplest way to collect the reactions of the constituents. MEP6 is trying to create Q&A sessions to establish how the direction of the public turns on specific issues.

> 'What makes direct contact with the constituents more interesting is to learn how they take the decisions of the Commission or the EP. If it was easier to spot and select the constituents who are serious about discussing policies, then these interactions could turn to a form of online public consultation, making a hugely positive addition to the promotional benefits of SMPs'. MEP6, 05/09/2016

Public consultation is what MEP20 claims to use to collect public opinion and constituents' viewpoints over the issues. He/she usually uses partisan contacts with action groups, social movement initiatives or interested individuals, outside the SMPs. Whenever there is a policy where his/her viewpoint is dictated by entirely personal judgement, this is openly communicated to the constituents via the SMPs, to collect reactions and determine how it is received. MEP4, on the other hand, has asked publically the constituents to state their views online in the form of a poll but that has happened only once or twice.

In practice, though, the tweet analysis does not designate a serious or systematic effort to collect public opinion. The only related categories are 'Ask' which is about the request of suggestions and is underrepresented with only 15 tweets, 'Redirect' which is about two instances of an off-line request for feedback and then some indirect categories like 'Commentary' where MEPs try to provoke a discussion with their comments on policies, 'Statement' which is again about provoking discussion through policy statements and 'EP news' which is about giving policy information for the shake of conversation. Consequently, only 17 tweets prove the effort to collect public views, while 353 tweets are indirect opportunities to get some feedback after a discussion has somehow been ignited.

There is a group of MEPs who not only find interesting the collection of public views but are also intrigued to use SMPs to direct public opinion. In other words, they focus on the exploitation of the interactive features of social media for the development of an influential character. MEP10 sees two significant challenges for the MEPs when using SMPs: One is to explain to the national audiences that there is a new competitive funding method in the EU, which requires the demonstration of innovation and ingenuity from the states, i.e. there is no free money anymore. The second is answering the fundamental question of why we remain together in the EU. After understanding the power of disintegration and after Brexit finalises, the remaining EU states must further integrate to ensure that the benefits of EU membership outweigh the costs.

> 'The responsibility to provide realistic answers about the challenges that will shape the future of Europe is upon our shoulders, i.e. finding innovative ideas/projects and reminding that EU membership should not be taken for granted. We (the MEPs) must become more influential and convincing, use SMPs to shape public opinion and help the constituents understand that accomplishments like the open borders, free movement, peace and security, are all successful outcomes of a 50yr negotiation which is still ongoing'. MEP10, 06/09/2016

With this in mind, MEPs 13 & 17 approach SMPs as a means to get the integration message across to the constituents, make them interested in the EU processes and persuade them about the common future of Europe.

> 'Most of the constituents fail to understand the realistic dimensions of the EU. To them, it looks like a distant and exotic destination where everything is ideal'. MEP17, 11/05/2017

SMPs, as a tool, can help the constituents consolidate the proposed policies. Because of the multiplier effect of social media, the MEPs' positions can reach a wider audience by sharing information, comments and feedback. To maintain their influential character, the MEPs must not overuse social media and overexpose themselves, because then the SMPs will lose their edge and appeal to the constituents.

MEP1 reminds that the MEPs should expect that in a time of crisis when the policies of austerity are not easily digested by the constituents, the expression of negative sentiment will affect the capacity of the MEPs to be influential and shape the public

views. If the interactions online are honest and well-intended, they can offer a sense of public opinion and the medium (SMPs) will not distort the general message that needs to be transmitted. Although there is a claim that constituents hide behind their anonymity and this distorts the message, MEP1 thinks that what makes online interactions honest is, in fact, the existence of anonymity which can make online dialogues more fruitful even when sentiment prevails. MEP15 favours the use of SMPs as discussion forums where facts can influence the views. To him/her, online interactions are about collecting, discussing and eventually influencing constituent's views based on the objective truth. The existence of sentiment in online interactions is not reducing the appeal of SMPs to his/her eyes. MEP24 clarifies that his/her main priority when using SMPs is to achieve political penetration to the public sphere, to maintain and increase his/her political influence by increasing the number of constituents who form their opinion according to his/her message or views.

> 'I know that other colleagues are invested in SMPs for re-election purposes. To me, the capacities of SMPs to enhance my political presence and to establish a permanent influence among the electorate as an opinion leader, matter more than the re-election in the EP'. MEP24, 18/07/2017

Apart from the majority of positive motivation that many MEPs find in the potential of SMPs to collect and influence public opinion, a number of MEPs express scepticism to the allocation of such qualities. MEPs 9, 20 and 23 insist that SMPs are not indicative of society's overall position and should only be used to get a slight sense of the public feeling, not an objective and conclusive impression of public opinion. MEP9 thinks it is a huge mistake to make generalisations about what the public thinks, solely based upon SMP interactions.

> 'The constituents engaging online are nothing but a self-selected sample. I cannot accept this limited group's view as an expression of public opinion, especially if the reactions are biased. It is not public opinion that can be collected through SMPs but merely a partial and fragmented sense of the initial public reaction to political developments'. MEP9, 06/09/2016

A reason for this is according to MEP16 that the followers in SMPs are not a representative sample of the society. In most cases, they are either affiliated supporters or disagreeing opponents. As a result, MEP20 remains unaffected by the reactions (positive or negative) that he/she may receive online. MEP23 enjoys the opportunity to

respond to individualised online interactions and likes the advantage of getting a sense of what constituents think but would not rely upon it as an overall collective view of the constituency. MEP23 reminds that

> 'Social media content is user-generated. In most cases, when the constituents provide information online, it is not fact-based but subjective and opinionated, therefore biased'. MEP23, 14/07/2017

MEP24 believes that what is collected is not what the society as a whole says or wants. It is just fragments of the public sphere, views and information of personal nature which need to undergo severe verification and scrutiny before being used.

> 'The ideal citizen is the free-thinking, informed and participating citizen. This is what I consider to be my clientele, constituents who choose to engage and actively participate with positive contributions. However, these are not critical mass. The majority of society remains a silent observer'.
> MEP24, 18/07/2017

Like MEP24, MEP12 is not interested in collecting this limited public opinion because he/she knows that fake or double accounts exist to create noise or mislead the MEPs to fake conversations.

6.2.3 Policy co-design

The motivation of the MEPs to co-design policies with the constituents is quite active in their claims. To MEPs 8&14, the essential feature of SMPs is under certain conditions, the design of the political agenda via discussions with the constituents. MEP14 favours the electronic facilitation of coproduction through either private SMPs or institutional solutions. He/she feels that this option does not contradict the established partisan structures and procedures as long as the MEPs can freely express their views during meaningful discussions. MEP11 is categorical about the importance of public contributions and the need for the MEPs to produce policies with the constituents. As MEP13 clarifies, so far this happens indirectly when the constituents offer their insight on a topic and help the MEPs to shape their views and transform them into proposals. For this reason, during both physical and online interactions with constituents, MEP21 is encouraging them to come forward with their criticism or their suggestions. As MEP1 suggests, all MEPs should seek out for the few productive members of the audience who can amaze with their proposals and should pursue further policy discussion. MEP10

claims to be one of those who prioritise the potential of exchanging views and ideas with the constituents about the EU policies and considers this to be crucial for the future of EU integration. MEP19 stresses the crucial character of constituent involvement in policymaking. He/she thinks that SMPs can promote direct democratic engagement in the form of constituents expressing their views constantly and not only during campaigning timeframes. MEP19 is personally opposing lobbying as the mainstream method to influence policymaking and wishes to see constituents taking the place they deserve in this process.

> 'I feel that any lobbying which does not involve NGOs favours the private industry in contrast to citizen interests. There are too many stakeholders exercising lobbying in Brussels, spending many resources without reflecting the constituents' interests. Promoting one-size-fits-all solutions with no topical relevance has no value for the smaller EU states'. MEP19, 30/05/2017

The evaluation of the MEPs regarding the existing social media landscape is questioning whether SMPs enhance policy co-design. MEP15 finds the feedback received so far to be very limited. He/she claims that he/she has never received approaches to embark upon a discussion of the policies or to propose related ideas, although he/she would be very willing to do so.

> 'In all honesty, I often wonder if anyone pays attention to my broadcasts and my invitations for interaction'. MEP15, 02/02/2017

This resembles MEP16's experience with the Committee of Petitions in the EP which EU citizens rarely address. The explicit request from the MEP to receive contributions from the constituents has not received significant correspondence. The suggestions or proposals expressed online to MEP16 have been minimal and very rare.

> 'It seems that there is no middle ground for the average thoughtful well-intended constituents to come forward. It is either supporters or opponents who interact in SMPs'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

MEP10 claims that in his/her case, some co-production of the political agenda seems to be taking place, and he/she ensures that whenever there is a useful suggestion, it is collected by the associates and further examined. Similarly, whenever there is a good suggestion online, MEP12 takes it into account for his/her work in the Committees. He/she estimates that the percentage of fruitful discussions within total SMP communication is less than 10%. Both MEPs agree that usually, constituents'

suggestions are not the outcome of an in-depth discussion of the issues within the SMP accounts but mostly spontaneous sporadic contributions. This makes MEP8 conclude that with such a small number of worthy interactions, the scenario where the constituents have a frequent synchronous unmediated exchange of ideas with their representatives via SMPs, in practice does not work well.

The MEPs claim that the reluctance of the constituents to initiate or maintain policy-related discussions online harms the intention of the MEPs to co-design the policies with them. MEP20 has no recollection of even a single case of a policy that has received a serious debate or discussion in SMPs. As a result, he/she does not expect that strengthening policy discussion online would add more value to the designed policies. To MEP19, social media works like a bubble without filters; the decisions taken in SMPs cannot inspire trust. An example is the various online polls to which nobody attaches real commitment because they are viewed as inaccurate and unreliable. This is because everybody knows that their outcome depends on how much active the campaigners are at the time. That is why MEPs 9, 19 and 23 insist that SMP interactions should not be taken as formal discussions but only as an opportunity for the MEPs to present their views and work, getting closer to constituents. Because of the SMPs' limitations, MEP23 makes clear that the co-production of policies online is not among his/her priorities. Although MEP19 accepts the capacity of SMPs to facilitate constituent expression, he/she is very sceptical about making mutual decisions with them online. Using a rather extreme critique, MEP22 calls 'rubbish' the argument that constituents can participate in a direct decision-making process through SMPs because the platforms facilitate noise and social turmoil. He/she believes that the constituents can be easily manipulated without realising their actions.

> 'Those who feel liberated by using SMPs are in reality, people who try to escape from other forms of oppression which are not yet realised'. MEP22, 11/07/2017

Sharing part of this reluctance about the capacity of the constituents to make rational decisions, MEP1 is not keen to support direct online decision-making. By using the example of the Brexit Referendum, he/she expresses concerns about the degree of awareness of the public when making decisions about crucial issues.

> ‘What worries me is the amount of misinformation that I come across. It is like having to always defend against fake news and non-evidenced arguments. I think that the constituents either offline or online should be encouraged to participate in decision-making activities only when they verifiably possess accurate information’. MEP1, 13/07/2016

With these views in mind, establishing a forward-looking atmosphere with the MEPs encouraging online discussions for policymaking seems like a difficult task. MEP19 can accept the expressive character of online interaction but feels that SMPs cannot replace physical open debate, meeting constituents in person and eventually using election and referendum live campaigns as an opportunity to discuss and decide over the issues properly. On the other hand, MEP3 understands SMP limitations but is somewhat encouraged by their advantages. Looking into the future, he/she is generally willing to support further constituent integration in the co-design of policies through SMPs, when the circumstances allow it. MEP24 feels there is always room for improvement and in the future would like to see the constituents providing data and information that could help the MEPs discover new arguments to improve their interventions in the EP. Finally, MEP14 offers a Eurosceptic explanation by pointing out that the EU will never officially encourage the co-production of policies with the constituents because Brussels wants to control the system of decision making. An internal example is that the non-attached MEPs cannot become rapporteurs or promote amendments, because the Committees disregard them. In this biased and control atmosphere, social media may be the only remaining way to enforce some degree of collective decision-making.

Taking into account all the previous claims of the MEPs, the tweet analysis consists of some interesting, relevant categories. The directly related to co-design are ‘Ask’, ‘Conversation’, ‘Vote’ and ‘Update’. The first two have already been discussed and reflect the individualised discussions that take place online for policy purposes ‘Vote’ is directly related to MEPs’ voting intentions and it accounts for 59 tweets while ‘Update’ is about updating the public with explicit information about the progress of ongoing policy design especially when the institutions reply to MEPs with new information. This category accounts for 56 tweets, and in total, all of the relevant categories account for 279, which is a mere 9.6% of the total PD tweets. Moreover, these numbers are not

necessarily reflecting the number of discussions that take place as many of the tweets represent short comments or quotes rather than actual suggestions that could be taken into account for policy design purposes.

6.2.4 Extending discussions beyond the constituency

The EU policies affect and influence the lives of all Europeans while the MEPs take part in pan-European partisan groups in the EP and thematic Committees regardless of their nationality. At the same time, the popular SMPs are open and free to EU citizens, and the MEPs' social media accounts can be accessed by citizens who would like to communicate with EP representatives regardless of their location. With these in mind, it comes as natural to wonder if the MEPs' online activity is limited to audiences defined by national parameters and standards or if there is also a volume of international interactions. It is quite interesting to mention here that two relevant tweet categories have been spotted. 'Domestic' and 'EU topic' reflect the themes of tweet exchanges regarding the topics of conversations. 'Domestic' is about referring to policies which affect the national or constituency issues directly while 'EU topic' refers to EU-wide policies of international significance. The tweets about domestic issues are almost two times more (with 383 tweets versus 146). This shows that most of the discussion is still limited to domestic matters, and the exchanges with people outside the constituency are scarce.

Nevertheless, several MEPs declare open and receptive to engaging with non-constituency members of the public residing in other EU countries. MEP3 considers him/herself as one of the few MEPs who experience international interactions due to his/her Committee work, which affects audiences outside the country of origin. There are frequent contacts with citizens, professional groups and NGOs from other countries and MEP3 feels like he/she is addressing an extended audience.

> 'The legislative work is about the needs of all member states, not just my constituents. We must remember though that unless we install some rules and filters, the MEPs will not be truly free from the fear of malicious confrontation. I believe that having secure SMPs is a precondition to

> liberalise the option of engaging with citizens from other constituencies or countries'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

MEPs 9 & 13 receive from time to time approach from people of a different nationality or those residing outside the constituency. These discussions are mostly related to topics the MEP has expertise in, as defined by his/her Committee membership, so they are mostly associated with Committee work. An example for MEP13 is the policy issue of language preservation, for which the MEP has had interactions with supporters of ethnic languages (e.g. Basque etc.) and has enjoyed the experience of connecting with international audiences. MEP1 has had a limited number of interactions with citizens from abroad. The general purpose of these was the concern of foreign citizens about the country's progress to exit the financial crisis. In a more detailed policy level, these discussions are mostly about the MEP's view on the crucial for the future of Europe issues like e.g. TTIP, immigration and austerity. They are mostly informative and not so focused on the MEP's work or the MEPs' performance. With regard to international discussions, MEP5 thinks that SMPs represents a window of opportunity to open up to the citizens of the world and not remain enclaved within national boundaries.

> 'These interactions are valuable to acquire a universal reach, they update us with developments, and we become aware of global trending issues. To have an international follower base is a resource for which any politician would have to pay vastly in previous decades'. MEP5, 31/08/2016

MEP15 relates his/her experience of international interactions to the capacity of SMPs to facilitate communication with dispersed constituents. Most of those interactions have been with people residing outside the constituency or abroad who supported the national party as nationals who migrated to other EU countries retaining the right to vote for the party in the EU elections.

Although MEP3 claims to have experienced non-constituent interactions, he/she recognises some SMP limitations further to the usual trolling. The language barrier plays an important role, and MEP3 tries to communicate in English for topics that have a broader impact, e.g. to express solidarity against terrorist attacks.

> 'I can do many things to declare my presence online, but it is questionable if I will manage to penetrate the citizenry of other states unless they are willing to communicate in English about their thoughts on issues of importance'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

MEP12 agrees with the language barrier. He/she has had some limited discussions with people from abroad and has received comments from other Europeans, but the bulk of interactions come from the constituents or the national audience addressing their representatives in the national language. MEP12 suggests that those who have the desire to pursue higher EU ranks are keen to use the English language to contact foreign audiences. MEP2 agrees that English is more appropriate for the MEPs who wish to acquire international influence and reputation, and English-speaking audiences are those that should be targeted in this case. MEP7 is one of the MEPs who solely use the native language to communicate online. This could be the reason why he/she receives minimal if any approaches from audiences residing in other EU countries. However, MEP7 reveals that the language barrier is only an excuse.

> 'In reality, if I wanted to have more international discussions, I would have, but I do not see any practical value in using SMPs to create virtual cross-border constituencies'. MEP7, 05/09/2016

Moreover, taking into account that national media always focus on their own MEPs, citizens from other states will find it difficult even to know who MEP3 is unless it has to do with specific actions and initiatives of international significance and appeal. As a result

> 'Regardless of how much effort is given to accommodate the needs of all EU states, the majority of the audience interacting online is the national audience'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

MEP11 supports the argument. So far, it has not been feasible for him/her to have international discussions online because he/she has been attached to traditional methods like gatherings and events with foreign guests. Sometimes speeches from MEPs of other countries are organised, to exchange practices and know-how about the various topics. MEPs 8 & 9 offer another explanation to the observation that the MEPs are mostly interacting with their constituents (national audience). As MEP8 suggests, EU-policy discussion is a process which requires the 'opening' of the public sphere to all of the EU's national audiences. However, as MEP9 reveals:

> 'The lack of more international interactions is associated with the lack of a European public sphere. This is a task that requires a comprehensible, long-lasting uninterrupted focus on the operation of European institutions so that all EU citizens are aware of the integration processes, the positions of the parties, the voting procedures, the Commission work, the EP and their MEPs,

> etc. I do not believe that existing SMPs can function this way and formulate a public sphere'. MEP9, 06/09/2016

So far, MEP8 has not had many interactions with audiences from other EU states and feels disappointed that only a few citizens are willing to do so. It seems that it is mostly journalists from abroad who express their interest whenever MEP8 increases his/her international broadcasts over certain issues.

The claims and suggestions of the interviewed MEPs do not offer a definite answer as to whether non-constituent interactions have the potential to shape the political discourse at the pan-European level. The MEPs are focusing mostly on the future facilitation of these discussions. MEP7 thinks that more comprehensive interaction of the MEPs with citizens from other EU regions can only emerge as a future democratic innovation and only if technological advancements permit it. MEP3 does not think that the MEPs will be able to represent all EU citizens in the near future unless the EU itself decides to provide a holistic answer by following a more federal structure. The proposal for the creation of a new legislative chamber with EU representatives from common partisan structures and ballots is the first step. The problems are too significant for the EU states to simply promote national interests or petty antagonisms. Also looking ahead, MEP11 would like to see greater contact with citizens from other countries being facilitated as a further step for the integration of Europe and the approach of peoples and cultures.

> 'International discussions based on common problems and solutions can only be pursued electronically. It would be so beneficial if we could have international teams working online. This is a necessity, not a desire'.
> MEP11, 06/09/2016

6.3 Policy discussion strategies

The MEPs focus on a series of online strategies when they use SMPs for policy discussion purposes. One of the indicated contributions of policy discussion is the value that MEPs receive in their legislative work. The motivation of the MEPs to formulate policies taking into account constituents' views requires the collection of these views, their scrutiny

and formulation to suggestions that can be forwarded for further debate at the Committee level.

6.3.1 Topic prioritisation

Concerning their motivation to expand the boundaries of policy discussion to wider audiences, a small number of MEPs proclaim the promotion of topics of EU interest. As mentioned in 6.2.4, the tweet analysis revealed 146 tweets related to policies with an EU-wide significance. If we add to this 43 tweets related to the promotion of the European integration (category Integration), then the final number of tweets (189) represents less than 6.5% of the total PD tweets. It is a number that cannot justify the argument that promoting a pan-Europan policy discussion is among the first priorities of the MEPs.

MEP3 does not see him/herself as a promoter of national interests but as a true European representative. He/she views the EU not as the sum of national interests but a sum of common policies and people working for a shared future. Thus, his/her interventions in the EP are mostly related to the issues discussed in the Committees where he/she works. Naturally, some of those issues are closely related to issues of national concern like, e.g. the refugee crisis. Even when the policies are designed foremost for other states, MEP3 reminds us that all states will have to eventually adopt EU legislation and apply standard solutions to the problems. That is why MEP3 approaches all issues from a European perspective, using SMPs to present his/her views on the topics that require more in-depth understanding and the need to be emphasised.

> 'The MEPs' job is to make the policies applicable to all EU countries. Customising legislation, according to national priorities, is bound to fail. With the help of colleagues from other states with whom I share a common understanding, I forward my broadcastings to their followers and try to have a presence among different audiences in Europe'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

MEPs 5 & 17 focus on discussing topics which are issues of European importance immediately relevant to their interests. MEP17 prefers topics which reflect his/her prior expertise in governmental positions, like those related to energy, industry, research, social welfare and working conditions. There are, of course, also topics with a national

or even local dimension which are at the forefront of their activities. For all of these topics the two MEPs ensure that they receive adequate online exposure, their associated actions are disseminated to the constituents, and there are engagement opportunities via SMPs to discuss their viewpoints and collect constituents' views. MEP23 addresses a variety of issues online with the desire to engage in discussions with the constituents. The content produced is mostly related to EU developments, whether this is EP decisions or commentaries on wide issues. The focus is on policies discussed in the Committees and generally about anything that he/she considers to be important for all Europeans.

> 'I use SMPs to provide the background of the EU decision-making process because I consider it important for EU citizens to have a good sense of how things work. By retweeting or forwarding, I usually flag up issues of importance or views addressed by fellow MEPs'. MEP23, 14/07/2017

MEP20 uses SMPs to broadcast or retweet commentaries on broader political issues or to initiate discussions about Committee work. Some of the international issues raising debates online have been in MEP13's experience, TTIP (which did not receive constituents' reaction and attendance as much as expected), the Syrian refugee crisis, the Palestine issue, as well as topics related to human rights which always wake up sentiment reactions and emotional responses from the constituents. MEPs 20 & 22 insist that feedback is mostly in the form of expressions of sentiment without a profound argumentative basis. Topics like the refugee crisis and the financial crisis have drawn much online attention from the constituents in the usual form of likes, comments, protests and demands. The most prominent examples of EU topics mostly discussed online with MEP18 are topics related to the gender equality, the unification of the digital market, the energy union and the financial crisis, which have raised a great interest and response interactions from the constituents.

On the other hand, there is a lot of interviewed MEPs who prioritise topics of discussion which have a more national character or else relate to policies which immediately affect national interests. The tweet analysis has already spotted 383 tweets with direct references to national or constituency-related topics and another 54 tweets related to partisan (not party-group) priorities (category Party). MEPs 2 & 19 have a mixture of topics to discuss online but usually prefer nationally-oriented themes stressing that

language is one factor for this decision. The other factor is topic popularity, e.g. during the Greek debt crisis, all MEPs from crisis-inflicted countries debated extensively on issues like austerity and reforms. MEP2 also chooses to use his/her native language online.

> 'It is not so much my preference to address topics of national importance that defines my choice to use the native language. It is mostly for convenience and because the constituents require speedy responses'. MEP2, 13/07/2016

Although the MEPs vote for legislation which affects all member states simultaneously, therefore, they have to demonstrate extensive knowledge of the various issues, MEP16 finds the interaction between the MEPs from different states as almost non-existent. This affects online discussions with the constituents.

> 'The MEPs are like transparent shadows in the EP. Instead of working together, we keep a distance from each other's boundaries. As a result, we only know about topics of national interest, topics discussed in the Committees or emergency topics that affect many countries at once (e.g. Syrian refugee crisis). These are usually the types of topics we can discuss online'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

Further to this, MEP17 suggests that by default the topics that interest the constituents are mostly the national topics of interest because, in contrast with his/her aspirations, these are the topics that traditional media promote to the audience. As a result, the constituents themselves consider national issues as more important because the more EU-oriented topics are not covered adequately. However, what an audience thinks about a topic is also a matter of social and political culture. The constituents simply respond to what they learn to like and unfortunately this is a defect of both the political system and of traditional media. With this in mind, MEP13 is mostly focusing on topics that relate to his/her constituency.

> 'I do not choose topics with a view to addressing local interests. I choose European issues which relate to the interests of my constituents, e.g. topics discussed in the Committees that affect my region. Yet I remain flexible about what constituents want to hear online, so I always pay attention to the topics that are most debated in traditional media. I know that these are the topics the constituents know more about and want to discuss further'. MEP13 06/09/2016

MEP13 remembers as the liveliest discussions online, those related to the issues of language heritage and motor insurance. Both of these were hot national issues producing useful feedback.

Following the topics from traditional media is a strategy that MEP4 is also using. Moreover, he/she liaises with the national party about the issues that need to be promoted online before using the SMPs. The national party for apparent reasons comes up with suggestions that refer mostly to national rather than European issues. At the very least, MEP4 tries to make the current European issues more relevant to the national debates or else to find European dimensions for the significant issues that exist back home. Eventually, most of the topics discussed online are topics of national debate which can receive attraction on a European level. MEP6's view on topics for discussion is very specific. Because he/she is elected in a regional constituency, considers him/herself as having a distinct geographical identity. This sets a clear priority towards constituency issues, although MEP6 like MEP4 always tries to find European dimensions and relevant associations to the issues.

> 'I recognise that I sometimes act as an alternative national representative because although my constituency is geographically large, there are many individuals, trade unions, local authorities, NGOs and business representatives who see me as their point of reference. They contact me with a series of issues that matter to them, and I feel obliged to attend those issues from Brussels. I feel it is required from me to have a more national or local approach to the EU issues'. MEP6, 05/09/2016

Some of the topics MEP6 discussed online were car insurance premiums for new drivers and hip-replacement covers for pensioners. MEP6 has received extensive feedback from both young and elder audiences for these topics of national interest. MEP10 in line with MEP6 understands that getting elected in a national constituency implies that the topics for online discussion must be somewhat related to the national audience. MEP10 informs that there is a quota of five Questions that each MEP can submit every month. He/she chooses two of those questions to be related to committee topics and personal interests in regional politics and energy. The remaining three are related to local/regional/constituency issues which are put forward by the constituents mostly through SMPs. To MEP21, there should be no special division between topics that relate to national or more EU-oriented issues. He/she prefers to address topics that are related

to his/her parliamentary and committee work, e.g. Wi-Fi access/roaming etc. MEP21 thinks that the topics which have generated the most extensive debates and online discussions with the constituents were those related to austerity, salvation packages and border safety. These topics of national interest generated the most considerable amount of debate and proposals from the constituents.

6.3.2 Redirecting discussions to other domains

For many MEPs, it is a common strategy whenever they come across the opportunity for a productive public conversation, to redirect the discussion to private domains, either online or physical. This tendency is relevant to their preference for private discussions and the avoidance of noise and malicious comments or the lack of fluency in SMPs. There are several MEPs who remain online when they divert the discussions from the public to the private domain. One choice is to have private one-by-one sessions without interference by using linked applications or private messaging within the SMPs. To MEP16 public online discussions are of similar quality to debates in television panels and neighbourhood disputes; there is too much noise. Eventually, they turn into an arena of miscommunication and misunderstanding which are repulsive for the considerate constituent.

> 'In public, the constituents can become aggressive either because they get carried away or because they feel intimidated and defensive. Private dialogues bring in the feeling of safety, and this normalises constituents' behaviour. Besides, for some of them, it is flattering to contact their MEP synchronously'. MEP16, 04/05/2017

MEP16 prefers using personal messages whenever there is potential for dialogue. He/she avoids the public sphere where distractions may occur, and he/she promotes the redirection of discussions to embedded private channels within the existing SMPs. To MEP24 the contribution of the constituents with suggestions and proposals is the exception, not the rule. Like MEP16, he/she is not favouring discussions in the public sphere and prefers to direct constituents to private interactions within the platform environment. As MEP21 mentions,

> 'The extent of online dialogues varies, and often it is not possible to receive a complete and holistic view or suggestion in the public SMP domain'.
> MEP21, 20/06/2017

In those instances, MEP21 suggests the use of internal tools or direct messaging for a private interaction, with constituents who seem to have a genuine interest and the quality to make a useful contribution. MEP3 is very passionate about offering the opportunity to constituents with good intentions and interesting views to reach out and engage, but so far he/she has only embarked upon private dialogues by using linked applications like Messenger. MEP3 wants to get more acquainted with SMP functions before having discussions in the public domain.

Among the MEPs who remain dedicated to online discussions, there is a group of MEPs who still use the SMPs to respond to discussion approaches but divert the actual discussion outside the SMPs. MEP14 agrees that Facebook and Twitter are inadequate for deep conversations and uses the forum sections in the official party webpage or the personal webpage to host the discussion with supporters.

> 'My SMP accounts function mostly as repositories or redirection routes where I upload links that forward the constituents to my webpage or the party's webpage where we can have a more efficient and manageable discussion'. MEP14, 31/01/2017

MEP11 also uses SMP accounts to link to the discussion forum developed in his/her personal webpage. SMPs are used as the promotional arm for the forum initiative. MEP19 claims to have received proposals from constituents via SMPs, but the instinctive reaction to these approaches was to continue the discussion in the private sphere through email messaging. Communicating online is different from face-to-face meetings, but even so, the quality of information collected is considerable.

Similarly to the MEPs who privatise the discussion but remain in the virtual environment, there are a few MEPs who choose to transform these online approaches to physical face-to-face discussions with the constituents. MEP8 finds annoying the use of SMPs for policy discussions because it removes the essence of personal contact with the constituents. He/she calls him/herself 'old-school', blaming the internet for the loss of the desire among constituents to have physical, political debates. MEP8 claims that physical discussion generates useful inferences while online public discussions generate extreme noise because trolling deteriorates the essence of the positions, diminishing

their importance. Thus he/she supports direct communication through live events and speeches and live face-to-face discussions with the constituents.

> 'SMP discussions are distant and faceless in a time when the MEPs need to establish close personal contacts with the public. I believe that whenever an MEP assumes a clear position that can be contradicted like, e.g. in favour or against Brexit, public controversy in SMPs turns into excessive trolling. It is better when these views and positions are redirected and expressed in the private sphere during a physical debate'.
>
> MEP8, 06/09/2016

MEP15 declares himself as being equally 'old-school'. Although he/she uses the SMPs to contact the constituents, he/she supports that a fruitful discussion online will eventually create the desire to have physical communication with the counterparts who contribute to the policies. This desire alone removes the element of communicational superiority from the SMPs. An interesting view comes from MEP17 who thinks that for MEPs from smaller EU states, it is easier to pursue direct physical contact with their constituents. In contrast, states of considerable size and great distances require that politicians use traditional media or social media for communication with the constituents. Besides that, in MEP17's view, the physical contact with the constituents is much preferable than a faceless SMP interaction where the MEPs may choose to ignore what constituents say.

> 'During my various tours around the constituency, there are always extensive debates and discussions with those interested to set up new topics. I think that the analysis and exchange of views can only be completed during a face-to-face dialogue because such a discussion entails the element of trust which comes from the physical contact of the two parts'. MEP17, 11/05/2017

Physical contact is not always feasible, but even in some traditional media like radio, there can be a live dialogue with constituents and listening to one's voice helps to build this trust. MEP17 concludes that SMPs can only respond to this need partially, firstly because it is not as direct as it seems and second because the MEPs cannot be on SMPs all the time.

The tweet analysis is very revealing about the tendency of MEPs to pursue engagement in or out of the SMPs. There have been two requests to constituents to have a private discussion via telephone with their MEP. On top of that, there have been 66 tweets related to events that the MEPs attended to promote specific policies. The provision of

links to traditional media (webpage, blogs, etc.) outside the SMP domain can be found in 230 tweets while only 95 similar links direct the constituents to other SMPs (mostly Facebook). Finally, there are 68 tweets that refer to articles with direct policy references, written and published by the MEPs, which are either linked or uploaded in the SMPs.

6.3.3 Proposal collection

Several MEPs are positive and optimistic about the prospect of online discussions leading to the use of constituent suggestions for policy formation. In fact, some MEPs claim that they engage in productive discussions with constituents which end up to policy proposals. MEP7 is enthusiastically supportive of the prospect of using the contribution of the constituents for the design of EU policies. He/she is overly critical towards the representative character of contemporary liberal democracy and would prefer the Aristotelian process of selecting representatives from a draw among the citizens rather than through elections. MEP3 informs that there are several constituent initiatives and contributions which end up becoming legislation. This proves how valuable the constituents can be in this process.

> 'It makes no difference how many or few of constituents' proposals become legislation. The constituents must feel at all times that their MEPs are there to encourage and facilitate the expression of their views and suggestions'.
> MEP3, 13/07/2016

MEP10 thinks that SMPs have a definite influence upon policy-making as mediums that facilitate the expression of new ideas which can be further explored. MEP21 is eager to collect and use policy suggestions stemming from the constituents, as long as they are justified and come as the result of in-depth discussion. In his/her view, requesting the constituents to contribute with proposals is not a promotional trick, but a value-adding process and the MEPs must always collect constituents' suggestions and elevate them to the appropriate level of scrutiny.

MEP6 also claims to have received policy suggestions during SMP conversations in the past. Whenever a good suggestion emerges, he/she investigates the underlying framework and gets back to the constituents with explanations of what he/she finds feasible and attainable. In MEP18's view, the representatives must be the guardians of the society and SMPs can be the open ears of the MEPs to receive the information

needed to fulfil their duty. Besides, the MEPs do not possess knowledge about everything, and many of their suggestions in the Committees and the EP should come after public or private consultations.

> 'I see myself as the receiver of ideas and proposals more than I see me as a broadcaster. We (the MEPs) need to listen, measure, amend and promote new ideas. The role of SMPs is to bring forward these ideas easier, quicker and less costly than with any other method. This is a normative process, and those who fail to understand the role of technology will finish last in the race of the digital revolution'. MEP18, 22/05/2017

Consequently, MEP18 is taking consideration of the online suggestions he/she receives as if they were coming from physical conversations. Nothing is neglected and always tries to correspond to constituents' approaches. MEP13 feels that there is vast room for improvement regarding the number of discussions taking place online, but first, the constituents must feel intrigued to engage. This is a responsibility of the MEPs, i.e. to provoke constituents into interacting rather than simply be a listening audience.

> 'The constituents only interact when they feel that the issue is affecting them; otherwise, they remain silent and indifferent throwing remarks here and there and using likes to express approval/disapproval. This substandard response is not an actual engagement; it is merely an acknowledgement of presence which limits the chances for honest discussion'.
> MEP13, 06/09/2016

Policymaking is a joint process, and in that respect, MEP19 is willing to discuss with constituents after he/she distinguishes those who seem credible enough for such conversations.

There is a number of MEPs who get discouraged from using SMPs for policy discussion because of the small volume of substantial proposals received online. These MEPs argue that the problem lies in the lack of desire from the constituents to discuss the EU policies. As MEP1 states…

> 'The unwillingness of the constituents to get acquainted with the specifics of EU policy design is reflected in the absence of any online discussion of the policies'. MEP1, 13/07/2016

MEP5 believes that the number of constituents who contribute with proposals online is minimal while MEP14 admits that he/she has not been able to have an extensive

dialogue online and blames the constituents' lack of willingness for that. Although MEP3 claims to be bombarded with demands and requests, expressions of generic views, unrelated ideas and fragmented suggestions, the number of substantial proposals he/she encounters is minimal. To MEP3, this shows that the constituents lack the awareness or the political interest to engage substantially, but it is not enough to discourage him/her entirely from the prospect of online discussions. The impression many have about the MEPs is that they should know all existing topics and be able to satisfy every single request.

> 'There is no real dialogue taking place online, only an exchange of primary opinions or else the footprint of someone's standpoint. Only a handful of constituents contribute by producing new content in a valuable way. This minority of contributors within the sea of junk and noise, deserve to be given appropriate attention'. MEP3, 13/07/2016

In contrast, MEP20 is not willing to promote policy suggestions simply because a handful of constituents expressed them publically in SMPs. MEP20 claims never to have encountered any valuable suggestions from the constituents that could enhance the proposed policies. MEP9 agrees that the opportunities for policy discussion online are from non-existent to minimal. Most of the constituents online are simply responding positively or negatively to what is broadcasted by the MEPs without giving valuable feedback. MEP18 adds to the argument by estimating the percentage of policy discussion generated online to be around 10-15% while MEP24 estimates the percentage of useful proposals to be even lower and no more than 10% of the total online interactions. This obliges him/her to repeat policy broadcasts in his/her SMP accounts often, using simplified language to ensure that the constituents understand the expressed viewpoints. As he/she admits:

> 'The constituents I am used to address online form an audience which is supposed to be more refined, politically interested and educated. It is what you would call upper-class. Yet, the lack of policy proposals even from those who are supposed to be well-informed, active citizens is surprising. This only suggests that their silence is a message to the MEPs and the political system. Abstaining with indifference has become an alternative way of participating'. MEP24 18/07/2017

Although constituents are not participating much in the discussions that MEP11 initiates, nevertheless they communicate to send views and comments, suggesting that

they prefer spontaneous forms of expression rather than structured pre-defined themes of discussion. Finally, some MEPs disagree in principle with the mutual design of policies. MEP4 does not support the co-design of policies with the constituents because he/she views SMPs only as a means to inform constituents about what the existing policies say.

One of the issues that some MEPs prioritise about the collection of online policy proposals is the role of their party or party-group when it comes to methods and mechanisms of proposal processing. MEP3 reveals that from the beginning of the EP term his/her national party proposed to the party-group to introduce tools of internal dialogue for legislative and political work but the proposal was not accepted. MEP10 considers national MPs as a vital part of the policy design process. The consultation with national MPs from the same party brings local and regional issues to the forefront and many of the topics that MEP10 puts forward for discussion online stem from this consultation.

> 'The national MPs are doing the micro-management of the issues in the national constituency. Their contribution cannot be substituted by the views expressed online by the public because constituent voices are not integrated and unified. I think this proves the indirect but important role of the party in policy formation'. MEP10, 06/09/2016

MEP6 thinks that engaging with constituents to collect suggestions and criticism should be taking place more constructively through partisan structures. MEP21 thinks that policy formation should first take place at the partisan level by forwarding constituents suggestions to the party-group where they can undergo further analysis. On the other hand, MEP23 suggests that it would be difficult for constituents to promote their suggestions through the partisan routes because party-groups are already collecting many diverse viewpoints from more collective sources. MEP7 and MEP19 are not aware of any processes for the accommodation and promotion of individual proposals either directly to the EP or the party-groups. MEP19 informs that in his/her national party, there is an annual process for policy design based on citizen proposals. Although this is not an electronic process, it is still very democratic for the determination of party policy but probably not feasible enough from a broad party-group perspective. MEP3 recalls that one of the official channels for EU citizens' proposals is the Committee of Petitions. Meanwhile, the collection of one million signatures through the ECI is another not-so-

popular method. MEP3 is unaware of any tools or mechanisms that could facilitate this process electronically, and there is no clear pathway yet about how to collect the concerns of EU citizens in a direct way. MEP14 verifies that although issues of specific interest intrigue associated groups of stakeholders to come forward with suggestions, there are no other official channels (electronic or not) for these proposals to be forwarded to.

The lack of available routes for direct proposal promotion puts many MEPs in the position to act as intermediaries. MEP14 is submitting written questions to the Commission as a result of constituents' requests, but the Commission usually replies that these issues need to be forwarded to the national governments. Eventually, it is in each MEP's initiative to incorporate constituents' suggestions in his/her working procedures, and SMPs can be the channels for the forwarding of such proposals. MEP21 thinks that a way to go forward with a constituent's idea is to make use of it in the Committees. Although this suggests that every proposal has to be relevant with the theme of the Committee where an MEP belongs to, he/she has collected in the past views and suggestions which were further exploited in this way. MEP3 emphasises the importance of online discussions as a step to go from simple generalised views to complex inferences but achieving honest policy discussion in SMPs is a topic that requires far more exploration. As MEP3 clarifies, the MEPs themselves can suggest topics in the Committees for Initiative Reports in order to provoke a discussion on a policy which results in a vote which then goes to the Commission and may define a framework of legislation. Alternatively, as MEPs 6 & 23 suggest the constituents' concerns about the legislation can be used by the MEPs to formulate questions directly to the Commission. What any MEP can do according to MEP6 in the case of a worthwhile proposal, apart from asking the Commission, is to raise the issue in the Committees or speak about it in the Plenary. MEP10 submits official proposals to the Committees which often embody ideas collected by the constituents. The suggestions received online are considered during a bi-monthly process by MEP10 and his/her associates. Sometimes there have been constituents with specific proposals on constituency issues who have been invited to meet MEP10 in person to discuss their suggestion in more detail.

The tweet analysis produced scant data regarding the topic of proposal collection. Only 5.7% of the PD tweets represent an unmediated individualised process of policy collection. The number is obviously very small and in line with the MEPs' estimates about the amount of policy dialogue that takes place online. The tweet analysis findings support the MEPs' requests for the creation of an institutional platform for open discussions with EU citizens regardless of their location.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter tried to shed light on the motivations of the MEPs to pursue online interactions which generate in-depth discussion of the EU policies and how these motivations are fulfilled in practice. The chapter started by presenting the main MEP motivations which are the justification and clarification of MEP views, the monitoring and influencing of public opinion, the co-design of EU policies with the constituents and finally the prospect of expanding policy discussions in their true European dimension beyond the limits of the constituency. Then the chapter continued with the strategies the MEPs apply online like the prioritisation of topics between EU-wide and local/national themes, the redirection of the initiated conversations to the private or the physical domain and eventually the collection and proper use of citizens' suggestions and proposals. The focus of the chapter was to determine what makes the MEPs willing to pursue online discussions; if this relates to the gap-bridging incentive to allow greater citizen participation in policy formation or to their desire to 'educate' the constituents according to their understanding of policy priorities which is in line with a particular brand-building character.

CHAPTER 7 - BRANDING REPRESENTATION VS REPRESENTING THE BRAND

7.1 Introduction

Having a more accurate view of what the MEPs think about the potential of online accountability and online policy discussion with constituents, it is imperative to examine in more detail how incumbent MEPs function as political entities which pursue the enhancement of their brand online in a landscape of confrontation and diminishing trust. In the previous two chapters, it became apparent that different 'types' of MEPs have different expectations from SMPs, which combined with their motivations, determine particular online behaviours in relation to accountability and policy discussion. This mix also determines the degree in which they broadcast, interact or discuss in their social media accounts as indicated by evidence collected from Twitter. In this chapter, emphasis will be given to the MEPs' perceptions about how to build or maintain a brand online. Moreover, whether they use descriptive features to match themselves with portions of the electorate and which type of persona they prefer to promote; that of an everyday approachable representative or that of a powerful 'educator' with inside knowledge of EU affairs (European expert) who can fill the information gap helping constituents to shape realistic expectations. One of the thesis's purposes has been to determine if branding is a vital motivational factor for the MEPs and how it dictates MEP activities and online interactions. In the relevant part of the tweet analysis, a total of 3612 tweets were categorised as Branding tweets (BR). Table 7 is offering a summary of the tweets and their categories in Appendix 6. The chapter begins as expected with the presentation of the motivations to perform online branding and continues with the strategic decisions taken by the MEPs. Finally, the last part provides the necessary connections to theory, concluding the discussion about online branding.

7.2 Branding motivations

7.2.1 Loyalty and electoral rewards

One of the arguments among the interviewed MEPs for the use of SMPs refers to the strengthening of ties with existing supporters. The personalisation of communication with the constituents is thought to increase their loyalty with the potential of future rewards for the MEPs. The tweet analysis on branding tweets indicated that the following categories relate and refer to supporter loyalty and potential rewards: 'Commentary' which refers to MEPs positions and consistency (ideological, partisan or ethical) containing 138 tweets, 'Domestic' which refers to national or constituency issues and how much dedicated the MEP is on pursuing those (383 tweets), 'EP intervention' which refers to how much responsive the MEP is to promoting specific constituency issues (129 tweets) and 'Vote' which is obviously about the voting behaviour of the MEP which can grant him future rewards if it satisfies the constituents (59 tweets). The total of 709 tweets from these categories equals almost 20% of the BR tweets.

Regarding the MEPs' claims on the topic, MEP4 thinks that the importance of social media is that it helps to build a good reputation and an increased level of trust among social media followers. MEP14 feels that existing supporters already demonstrate considerable trust online and take for granted the honesty of their MEP's broadcasts. This trust of judgement improves constituent loyalty whenever negative information for their MEP circulates and can be a suitable defence mechanism against trolling or fake news stemming from opponents. This motivation to maintain a faithful follower base, an eager audience and a 'clientele' that would support the MEP no matter what is the primary motivation for MEP24. MEP4 thinks that the brand building capacity of social media is proven invaluable because the amount of trust and credibility that is generated among the social media followers makes them more susceptible to adopting the views of their MEP. In that respect, social media has a dual function: the brand enhancement process also results in an opinion-shaping capacity, which does not involve the actual engagement or exchange of views with the MEP. The broadcasted message by the MEP has enough credibility to be taken as such by a faithful audience. To MEP15, both

personal integrity and political consistency are needed to achieve high levels of trust and credibility. From these two features, he/she favours personality, because this is the element that can be sustained via direct communication with the constituents. MEP15 supports that personal quality and political intentions together should be seen as building blocks of a political brand which is continuously assessed by the public. These arguments indicate that loyalty and dedication are linked to establishing personal ties with the constituents. MEP8 thinks that politicians should maintain these ties because

> 'Only intimate discussion can add value to an interaction. Although it is not possible to know all constituents in person as most of them remain anonymous, those who maintain frequent online contact are also the ones who will most probably promote the MEP's brand'. MEP8, 06/09/2016.

In line with this argument, MEP16 is motivated to establish a personalised channel of communication beyond traditional mediums, where he/she can pursue individualised interactions with the constituents interested to hear what he/she had to say. Although agreeing in principle, MEP2 claims that in practice, it is difficult for a 'professional' politician to pursue individualised interactions online, due to the variety of time-consuming working obligations.

Although these MEPs seem supportive of the argument that social media engagement fortifies the follower base, they do not seem equally optimistic about the potential of translating the support into electoral benefits. To MEPs 13 & 24, the personalisation of online interaction is of secondary importance unless the MEP is talented enough to persuade the constituents to vote for him/her. Being informative and accountable, discussing policies or promoting specific issues of international appeal online are worthy causes as long as they create a unique connection which can last until Election Day. Affiliating with the constituents offers personal satisfaction, but the real satisfaction for a professional politician comes from the reward of re-election. As MEP12 stresses, the value of SMPs is that they allow communication and access to all. Whether this is important is a matter of purpose and prioritisation.

> 'An MEP must evaluate the potential for re-election when the time comes. Politicians are like working bees; they wait all their life for the one chance to fertilise the queen bee'. MEP12, 06/09/2016.

When the people who follow the MEP's social media accounts consistently, are given a full picture of the MEP's thematic actions and conscious choices, then the potential for

electoral success increases. MEP19, on the other hand, is more reserved in his/her judgement about whether social media has clear electoral benefits. From personal experience, although the number of social media followers has increased over the years, it is still vague whether this has contributed to the actual number of votes he/she has received. In this direction, MEP11 notes that in the last election, many votes came from regions of the country where he/she had no real penetration from a physical or social point of view. MEP11 thinks that SMPs have something to do with this outcome, but more research is required before conclusions are drawn.

> 'Social media does not require to invest a great deal of money; it is widespread and accessible by anyone and communication becomes easier, making it a useful tool to support the candidacy'. MEP11, 06/09/2016.

On the other hand, a larger group of the MEPs are pessimistic or even contrary to the potential of accumulating significant rewards from maintaining a solid follower base in social media. MEP6 is more interested in 'where the votes are' and thinks that traditional media is more critical for electoral purposes. Traditional media is offering publicity through TV and radio to audiences not reached by SMPs.

> 'SMPs do not seem to be powerful enough to consolidate electoral profits. Winning the battle of social media is not necessarily winning the war of elections'. MEP6, 05/09/2016.

MEP2 is strongly oriented to a cost-benefit evaluation of online participation, measuring potential electoral gains. He/she claims that interacting online with the public is beneficial only if it shields the existing faithful 'clientele'. If SMPs are not facilitating significant electoral profits, then there is no point to engage further. Similarly, for MEP4, at the end of the day, social media is all about the votes an MEP can secure. MEP15 thinks that many other colleagues like MEP4 use social media to promote an attractive persona for electoral reasons. MEP2 also points out that the MEPs must make an impression according to domestic political criteria because it is national citizens that vote. The problem is that although an MEP can demonstrate his/her interest for issues of local/national/regional importance by voting in the EP or by submitting questions, he/she has no way to evidence that this activity contributes to solutions with direct practical significance for the constituents. This requires long-lasting monitoring of the

post-legislative process, which intersects with what national governments do, and consequently, direct MEP contribution remains vague.

> 'The potential to savour electoral gains stemming from an objective evaluation of my contribution in the EP by the public is rather poor'.
>
> MEP2, 13/07/2016.

To MEPs 13&4, an essential aspect of social media is to help MEPs increase their engagement with the constituents having in mind the next election, although online communication is not generally associated with electoral gains. As MEP13 states….

> 'Facebook friends will not turn up to your funeral'. MEP13, 06/09/2016.

Besides, MEP5 supports that the reach of social media is currently exaggerated. The number of people directly engaging on a continuous basis is overestimated, and the participating followers on Twitter or Facebook are only a small proportion of the electorate. As more and more people rely on SMPs, this will change but for the time being SMPs are only helpful with image improvement, not measurable electoral gains. MEP4 suggests that social media is not a verified method for political rewards because….

> 'The number of SMP followers is not correlated to the number of votes an MEP gets'. MEP4, 31/08/2016.

MEP4 further stresses that the strategies used by the MEPs online to secure the follower base do not necessarily shield the voter base. So instead of taking actions focused solely on building a 'religious' follower base, it is preferable to address the audience by building a brand of trust and credibility. In this direction, MEP21 avoids using social media to promote issues that reflect personal interests or aspirations and prefers to disseminate information about work and activities, hoping that this will strengthen a potential future candidacy. Finally, MEP14 is not allowing him/herself to use social media as a mechanism of political impressions by saying 'smart things' online. Although this is very appealing to a portion of the electorate, he/she is ethically opposed to receiving electoral gains of this kind.

7.2.2 Expanding the supporter base

Apart from strengthening the ties with existing supporters and securing a loyal follower base in social media, a large number of MEPs acknowledge the importance of improving their brand as a means of expanding their penetration to new audiences. The two

categories from the tweet analysis, which are most relevant to this topic are ‘EU topics’ and ‘Info’. The first is about topics of EU-wide importance which embrace the needs and interests of expanded audiences outside the constituency or the national borders. The other is about providing a series of information and evidenced data about how EU decision-making (EP or Commission) affects the lives of all Europeans. The total of 312 relevant tweets represents almost 9% of the BR body of evidence.

MEP7 thinks that the function of social media mostly appreciated is that SMPs enhance recognisability and help the MEPs reach wide audiences. MEP15 agrees that social media is useful to expand the supporter base and reach out to the constituents who cannot be reached with physical contact. MEP6 uses social media to address constituents from a vast geographic constituency and broadcasts information focusing on 'getting the message across' to a broad audience. He/she declares willing to invest heavily for the promotion of his/her brand to expand the number of supporters. MEP8 thinks that significant priority for most of the incumbent MEPs is to enlarge the clientele that got them elected. As a result, SMPs are customised to support and promote their political brand. However, MEP8 raises doubts as to whether it is possible to measure the penetration of social media because some MEPs purchase fake 'likes' and fake social media followers. MEP24 agrees with the suspicion that some of the comments, likes and criticism received are fake. Among the MEPs with a similar follower base, some receive 5000 views/comments in a week and some others 30000 in a few hours.

> ‘Receiving too many interactions too soon is an indication of an industry of impressions which trades likes, views and comments for publicity impressions’. MEP5, 31/08/2016.

Furthermore, MEPs 24 & 22 have visited the social media accounts of colleagues, and they have been surprised with how some MEPs lie about their activities in the EP, e.g. claiming participation in sessions or submitting questions. During the process of self-promotion, many MEPs go as far as to broadcast false or fake information about their political participation. Meanwhile, as MEP19 points, other MEPs choose to use SMPs to expose elements of their personal life, hoping to build a persona of intimacy. They end up promoting an ideal image, an optimal version of their self which does not actually exist because what someone sees online is not what happens behind closed doors.

MEP21 suggests this is the result of some MEPs' urge to promote an attractive online persona in their anxiety to attract more supporters. With this in mind, MEPs 12 & 18 avoid broadcasting anything related to their personal life as they are not interested in gaining publicity for anything other than their work in the EP. The MEPs must build their reputation online based on what they support and how they work. That is why MEP10's posts and uploads are only related to politics (positions & views, commentary & statements, questions & interventions, events and activities) and have no affiliation to matters of personal nature.

There seems to be an overall agreement among the MEPs that establishing an appealing online brand is part of a promotional strategy which exploits the benefits of SMPs. As MEP7 describes, among the MEPs with a similar amount of posts and time spent online, those who choose to create impressions through quotes and political declarations, attract more attention. The unfortunate truth is that the MEPs who choose not to create online impressions and focus on substance and dialogue, do not attract the audience's interest. To MEP14 the form of communication which is based upon impressions is not appealing. He/she wishes to establish a brand of honesty and transparency, which is best expressed by being him/herself without trying to be pleasant and likeable in order to gain votes. For this reason, MEP14 avoids online public confrontation or commenting on what other politicians publish. His/her online presence is mostly informative, and the SMPs are not used for personal promotion or improvement of the brand. MEPs 20&14 feel that the political landscape gets distorted by the effort of politicians to create impressions with their online content and not with their work.

> 'When you see most of my colleagues pursuing online exposure and public recognition more than anything else, often through useless confrontations, then you can expect that the SMPs will reproduce the pathologies of the existing political system'. MEP20, 07/06/2017.

Although this may be beneficial for the MEPs in terms of electoral gains, it is not something that improves the quality of politics. The relatively small online interactivity experienced so far makes MEPs 2, 9 and 23 to believe that SMPs are more useful for promoting MEP activities than they are to exchange views with the constituents. To these MEPs, event and persona promotion in a cost-effective way are the essential social media features. Consequently, as MEPs 20 & 21 state, the current reality in SMPs is that

they are used by the MEPs as marketing mechanisms and broadcasting tools to justify their presence in the EP and promote their political profile.

Some MEPs link the amount of social media exploitation for promotional purposes to the nature of their brand. MEP17 considers this to be the era of images, looks and appearances, further exacerbated by new technologies. He/she feels that has an already established brand because of prior governmental positions. Being well-known nationally, he/she always receives invitations for media appearances and does not feel the need to use SMPs for promotional purposes or to gain attention and publicity.

> 'The MEPs who are more open to using SMPs to create surplus value for their brand are mostly colleagues with non-established brands and limited scope in Brussels. Many of them use fake online personas, reminding me of the stock-exchange bubbles; when the bubble bursts, the reality becomes painful'. MEP17, 11/5/2017.

MEP2 agrees that SMPs can become brand-generating mechanisms for candidates without an established brand. MEPs with a long and established offline reputation, cannot expect to use SMPs to change or improve their brand. MEP10 admits that the social media influence on his/her brand has been subsidiary because the brand has been shaped in the past from the previous professional background. People do not remember him/her for what is promoted through social media accounts. He/she is still using the same Twitter account that was opened with the previous professional identity. MEP10 has an already recognisable image, a reliable brand and a significant follower base. Brand promotion is a secondary priority because the proof of who he/she is comes from the work he/she performs. For that reason, social media profiles are fully work-oriented and not lifestyle-oriented without being indifferent to know the level of his/her penetration in the public sphere as an indication of popularity.

Similarly, MEP13 thinks that his/her online brand is an extension of the one already possessed and SMPs are more of a reassurance mechanism. Using SMPs is more about broadcasting an informative message to the audience and receiving feedback that indicates how well the MEP is doing. MEP4 clarifies that until the last election two types of candidates were elected as MEPs in his/her country; one is former politicians who served for many years in the national legislative body, and the other is famous

personalities recognised by the electorate for their non-political activities. In both cases, the candidates had established brands, and people were voting them based on these predefined brands, which were replicated online.

7.2.3 Promotional advantages

A series of MEPs found a normative explanation in the use of SMPs. As MEPs 9, 15, 19 and 20 emphasise, SMPs have become a 'necessary evil' imposed by the advancement of technology which cannot be ignored because there is a constant increase in the number of constituents using them. Social media turns into the prevalent source of political information with citizens abandoning the printed and digital press. As MEP9 notes, social media has expanded so much during the last few years that the old communication routes are almost replaced. This obliges the MEPs to adapt and 'play the game' of social media. In fact, he/she acknowledges the importance of SMPs for promotional/communicational purposes by using the word 'market' to characterise the virtual landscape. MEP12 acknowledges the new trend, which is formulated when both younger and older generations use SMPs as the predominant medium to access information. To MEP12 this reality has a normative character as he/she is confident that technology will eventually change the future polity if not the world as we know it. Topics/actions/priorities are all defined or at least shaped by social media. In an era when new technologies are the key to everyday life, MEP12 would not allow being left behind. Responding to increasing online engagement is the only way for politicians to survive in today's political environment. To MEP18, social networking has become a fundamental human right of our time, destined to develop further. Both society and democracy would be taking steps back if they were not supporting the expansion of SMPs. To MEPs in particular, the constituents' participation online is important and positive. MEP18 intends to maintain his/her involvement in technological developments because

> '….if the MEPs lose the pace of democratic innovations they will eventually lose the train to political evolution'. MEP18, 22/05/2017.

Exploiting the promotional qualities of social media is a motivation for several MEPs who believe in the capacity of SMP to promote their brand more efficiently. MEPs 1 & 12

admit that SMPs are mostly used by the MEPs as marketing mechanisms more than anything else, because of their promotional capacity. As MEP19 explains, there is no doubt that every politician (not only the MEPs) is using SMPs as a promotional tool because SMPs are better than traditional media when it comes to personal promotion. With SMPs, the MEPs can control both the message transmitted and the degree of their exposure. MEPs 18 & 23 point out that SMPs have the advantage of combining low cost with full accessibility to large audiences, elements vital for a successful promotional strategy, especially for events organised by the MEPs. By using SMPs as a reminding tool, MEP6 can visualise his/her activity with videos, links and blogs. Most importantly though MEP6….

> '…can keep the message running simultaneously offline and online'.
>
> MEP6, 05/09/2016.

MEP17 considers that the use of social media has inevitably strengthened his/her brand. A national/local politician may find it adequate to use traditional media and face-to-face interaction to communicate with the constituents but spending much time abroad makes it vital for the MEPs to be able to publish work and activities from the EP. Social media has also been proven a critical medium for social mobilisation, and this aspect should not be ignored when addressing sensitive issues which can affect constituents' impression of the MEPs. MEPs 2 & 18 stress that embracing social media is fundamentally improving the MEPs' brand as modern policymakers. Social media can burnish the existing brand with a hint of modern open-minded and ICT-friendly polish. MEP18 considers the online promotion of his/her profile to be an automatic function. By using SMPs, it becomes inevitable for every politician that a specific picture is 'painted' for them. MEP18, for example, has been declared as the most ICT-oriented MEP in his/her country and has taken various initiatives regarding issues of technological progress. At the same time, he/she is focused upon youth issues and tries to remain attached to the younger generations by exploiting digital technology. He/she considers as part of an established brand to associate with younger audiences which are not so keen to traditional face-to-face interactions like gatherings, speeches and relevant activities and prefer to use popular SMPs. Younger generations become more distant from traditional media and to be close to those audiences, the MEPs need to use the method of communication that proliferates, i.e. SMPs.

The tweet analysis, as expected, produced a long list of categories of tweets which are used in relation to the promotional qualities of SMPs. First of all, there are promotional events (107 tweets) which the MEPs attend for publicity purposes, and then they post or publish pictures or videos (33 tweets) about these events in the SMPs. Quite often, this happens with the use of links either to traditional media (230 tweets) or other social media (95). There are also more 'old-fashioned' methods like interviews (310 tweets) or speeches in social events (60 tweets) that the MEPs use and then digitise, using the SMPs as a vehicle to promote their profile. The 835 relevant tweets represent 23% of the collected BR sample.

7.3 Strategic decisions

7.3.1 The party message

One of the branding-related decisions that the MEPs have to take online is about how to balance their personal brand and their party's brand when they broadcast or communicate with the constituents. The tweet analysis is not very revealing on this topic as only 104 tweets, or else 2.9% of the total sample refer to party brand promotion and how the MEPs use the SMPs for party-related initiatives. From the collection of interview data, two major groups are formulated among the MEPs when we try to define the character of the brand they choose to promote online. A series of MEPs emphasise the importance of the party brand as a parameter which facilitates their capacity to come closer to the constituents via SMPs. They acknowledge that their political profile is inherently associated with their party and some of them even diminish the importance of the personal brand, allowing it to be absorbed by the party brand. The party brand is crucial to MEP4 as a candidate coming from a small region with limited penetration to the electorate of a sizeable unified constituency. MEP4 admits that he/she would not stand a chance to be elected if the party brand had not been put at the forefront of the campaign. MEP4's communication strategy was to come out in the SMPs together with the other party candidates as one homogeneous team with a single message, asking from the citizens to support them so that the party could grow and strengthen. As each candidate represented a different constituency, they formed a national party-team claiming it would bring more critical analysis to the existing debates in the EP via

complementary work. In fact, MEP4 thinks that the nature of national politics is such that the team will either be re-elected or be removed altogether in future elections, the same way they got elected in the first place. MEP19 is closely collaborating with MEPs elected from the same national party and tries to be consistent to the party message. They work together as a team even when they disagree and always demonstrate their loyalty to the party, regardless if in the EP there is an ability to 'push the boundaries' on various issues.

> 'At the end of the day the constituents voted for a party first and we, the elected MEPs, represent this choice as members of the party'.
> MEP19, 30/5/2017.

MEP10 is an MEP who is not fond of the 'rebellious' style of representation which dictates a political behaviour independent from the party. He/she believes in mutual/collective actions and thinks that partisan initiatives have a more significant impact than individual MEP choices, as long as they do not question the MEPs' conscience or integrity. Thus, he/she always lets the personal brand to reflect the party of origin as the source of directions. The party brand is a crucial element for MEP22 since he/she became the leader of a newly established party, which was formed on the basis of a partisan schism. The party brand and the personal brand are almost identical in this case.

Another group of the MEPs is categorical about the importance of maintaining independence from partisan limitations, which are reflected in their choice to brand themselves as MEPs of personal integrity who make choices solely based on their judgement. The party message is not a priority for MEP20 and his/her commitment to act in a specific way depends upon the topic at hand.

> 'MEPs are not relying upon partisan structures and channels as much as national MPs do'. MEP20, 07/06/2017.

MEP11 believes that for reasons of ideological tradition, in his/her party-group in the EP, it may be easier for the MEPs to deviate from the partisan directives without receiving sanctions while in other party groups this may be more difficult. MEP24 agrees that some parties are more liberal or flexible with their MEPs, not designating or suggesting how the MEPs should vote. As MEP23 verifies...

> ‘Party-groups in the EP are diversified and collective, so it is rational for the MEPs to give priority to putting forward their personal views’. MEP23, 14/7/2017.

Although the views broadcasted online are personal, most of the time, it also happens that they are similar to the partisan positions or supportive of the policies promoted by the EP group. As MEP21 suggests, his/her views are influenced by what the party thinks, but when online, it is mostly the personal views that are put forward to the constituents. MEP16 also thinks that partisan affiliations are essential for the formation of a public profile, and too many MEPs make decisions according to the party line. Nevertheless, in his/her case, the profile people view online is that of a less-attached-to-parties politician who promotes independent views. Consequently, his/her communicational style, the online broadcasts and overall presence in social media are supportive of this image, which the constituents seem to find more attractive. MEPs 11 & 24 remain loyal and vote based on their personal choices, ensuring that these views are broadcasted publically through their social media accounts. In some cases of issues/topics of particular importance, there have been occasions when MEP23 felt obliged to raise attention online and provide further explanations regarding his/her voting behaviour.

Finally, there is a group of MEPs who prefer to search for the optimal balance between the party brand and the personal brand according to the occasion. MEP6 states that every MEP needs to support these separate brands simultaneously and SMPs help to keep the balance and the consistency between the two. MEP13 admits to having exploited an established brand based on his/her family name to secure non-partisan votes. As a result, the personal/family brand is preserved in parallel with the party brand, which is permanently reproduced. Similarly, MEP15 claims to have an established brand which is beyond any partisan affiliations and views him/herself as an autonomous political entity more than a party member. For this reason, he/she favours communication with anyone outside partisan structures, willing to work for a mutual cause. At the same time, though, when it comes to SMPs, MEP15 believes that the party better facilitates constituents' needs.

> ‘The reproduction of the personal brand online should be balanced by the party message’. MEP15, 02/02/2017.

MEP3 points out how, during campaigning instances, the image broadcasted is affected by the party positions and the embracing of the partisan agenda. Most of the campaigning topics are partisan, and so is the image promoted. Although there is much more tension during campaigning, it lasts only for a short temporary window. The workload is such that soon afterwards, the MEPs return to their everyday duties where they can pursue a more personalised brand promotion.

7.3.2 Campaigning behaviour

The politicians' behaviour when campaigning for elections is differentiated from the one they demonstrate during routine timeframes. Yet, even outside electoral periods, the MEPs may still campaign in favour of the various causes they support. The tweet analysis indicated in 85 relevant tweets that the MEPs promote their causes online or promote material related to their campaigning effort (77 tweets). A more direct way is to request from the followers to offer their support to the promoted causes (15 tweets) either directly or by further promoting the causes. Finally, the MEPs often broadcast on the SMPs the events they organise or participate in by using the Lice Feed options of the platform, bringing in a synchronous manner their campaigning activities to the constituents' doorstep.

When it comes to their brand and the way it is presented online under campaigning conditions, the interviewed MEPs admit that they proceed to adaptations of varying intensities. A group of MEPs (2, 7, 13, 17 and 23) admit that campaign requirements affect their behaviour in SMPs. When campaigning for an issue, the virtual sphere changes and becomes more energetic and stressful than usual. This imposes individual customisations to their online brand. MEP13 prioritises the campaign topic online demonstrating the behaviour of tension and persistence. MEP17 finds the opportunity for increased interaction and favours direct contact with the constituents. When campaigning, the immediacy increases, and there is almost every day debate with contrasting opinions.

> 'The intensification of online communication during campaigning alters the quantity and the quality of the interactions. This allows the MEPs to promote their agenda under the influence of contrasting impressions'.

MEP17, 11/5/2017.

MEP2, for example, uses SMPs to promote the campaigning issue in combination with traditional media interventions and intensifies the approach of younger audiences to pursue brand modernisation. Although MEP2 generally appreciates SMPs as mechanisms of campaigning significance, he/she suggests that actively pursuing bi-directional communication with the constituents, should be part of a strategy which takes into account issues like the allocation of personal time, resources and costs. MEP23 believes in the influential capacity of social media to affect constituents' decisions, especially when campaigning for important causes like a referendum.

> 'By adapting the communicational style to the task at hand, the SMPs improve the visibility of the brand'. MEP23, 14/7/2017.

MEP7 has used Twitter to broadcast and comment on specific campaigning topics and admits that the character of these broadcasts was purely promotional. Creating impressions online is easier during campaigning periods when he/she has to be persistent or even aggressive to attract support, but during relaxed routine timeframes, the MEPs have to demonstrate their actual profile.

Another group of MEPs (6, 19, 21 and 24) although agree that social media is a modern and useful way to promote campaigns without the need to alter their behaviour during routine timeframes significantly. To MEP19 campaigning online translates to more frequent updates and more abundant availability of linked documentation in the social media accounts. The intensification of activity does not alter the nature and the consistency of the broadcasted message, and consequently, the brand is not affected by the campaign topic. Equally, MEP24 is not changing his/her online approach for campaigning purposes.

> 'The only thing that changes is the pace and volume of incoming requests and questions from constituents. Due to public demand for further attention, the need to respond becomes larger, but that is not affecting overall behaviour'. MEP24, 18/07/2017.

MEP24 considers his/her online presence as being in a constant campaigning mode, and this requires to be open, accessible and honest all the time. MEP21 finds it inevitable to adapt his/her social media profiles to accommodate the rationale of the campaigning issues, but on a personal level, he/she remains open, receptive and maintaining the same approach to constituents as ever. MEP6 retains the same behaviour during

campaigning and routine timeframes. The number of issues that run simultaneously impose constant provision of explanations and clarifications about policies that MEP6 is co-producing.

> 'The feedback that constituents demand, requires constant interaction on the related issues, whether it is campaigning time or not'. MEP6, 05/9/2016.

Finally, there is a group of MEPs (8, 9, 12, 14, 15 and 18) which are reluctant or negative even to the idea of using SMPs for campaigning purposes. This comes either as a choice to prefer physical means of communication with the constituents or because of the lack of capacity/experience to use SMPs extensively. MEPs 8 & 9 have chosen not to use social media accounts for campaigning purposes. To MEP9, this has been a conscious strategic choice unrelated to political reasons, linked to his/her preference to have a physical presence in the constituency. Similarly, MEP8 is only using SMPs as a communication tool because he/she prefers to be physically campaigning and therefore, has not received any campaigning benefits from SMPs. As it is not among MEP18's priorities to seek over-exposure in order to gain support for his/her causes, there is no difference in his/her online presence between routine and campaigning timeframes, and the social media accounts remain intact.

> 'Campaigning online is not significant enough to characterise the brand. My views and suggestions are broadcasted consistently to the public at the same pace and manner'. MEP18, 22/05/2017.

MEP14 understands that the majority of the MEPs use their social media accounts to make themselves more influential for campaigning purposes but campaigning online is not among his/her interests and has no intention or incentive to change current online behaviour. MEPs 15&12, on the other hand, declare a lack of experience in preparing and organising campaigns online with MEP12 being more willing to use SMPs for the promotion of future campaigning efforts. MEP15 also calls him/herself 'old-school' with minimal participation of SMPs in his/her preferred promotional activities which are mostly impulsive without a scheduled character or a long-lasting intention.

7.3.3 Virtual and physical presence

One of the elements that define the penetration capacity to the constituency audience relates to the MEPs' strategic choice of 'how much' and 'what for' when it comes to using SMPs in their communication with the people who elected them. With regard to the topics the MEPs address, the decision to have a virtual or physical presence in the constituency affect the methodology they adopt and consequently, the way their brand is shaped online. According to MEPs 14 & 20, the majority of topics they broadcast online are of national interest or otherwise refer to the outcome of the European policies for their constituency. Being elected in a national constituency creates an obligation towards the constituents while almost all of the national issues have a European angle or influence, especially in the era of crisis. MEP2 considers the ability to explain issues of international significance to national audiences as part of his/her brand and prefers to influence national politics from above with interventions of EU importance (e.g. ESM, debt-relief plans). Besides, he/she recognises that English-speaking audiences are those that should be targeted if an MEP wants to acquire extended influence as a politician and gain an international reputation. MEP2 is experienced enough to know that EU policies and decisions are undergoing lobbying in Brussels and focusing on issues of local importance (e.g. compensation for hail-inflicted farmers) is not really affecting the brand or providing any electoral benefits. Nevertheless, he/she acknowledges that it is the reference to domestic issues which attracts national audiences.

> 'It is imperative to refer extensively to constituency issues in order to keep the audience engaged'. MEP2, 13/07/2016.

MEP15 being a politician who is not broadcasting or posting frequently, prefers to publish views on the popular topics that relate to the society, the economy and foreign affairs. Still, he/she posts only for topics that are of interest to the followers and not about every single issue found in traditional media.

Among the interviewed MEPs, there is a group (1, 2, 4, 6, 16, 18 and 21) who embrace the potential of using a mix of virtual and traditional methods of contact. MEP16 thinks it is inevitable to use social media to update the constituents about how their MEPs work to resolve constituency issues. Taking into account that non-political comments are met online with hostility and criticism and that the audiences differ among the two platforms

Twitter and Facebook, MEP16 finds it essential to be pluralistic when interacting with constituents and this entails using a combination of methods and approaches. SMPs should not be used in exclusivity as MEP4 states.

> 'SMPs are complementary to traditional media and both should be used in parallel'. MEP4, 31/08/2016.

MEP4 is using sometimes social media as a tool to increase the reference to his/her name and attract further traditional media coverage. To MEP18 shaking constituents hands could take all day while in social media with minor effort, cost and time an MEP can promote his/her work or campaigns. Thus face-to-face contact and social media interactions can co-exist as parts of a holistic approach, and the combination of methods is feasible if the MEP can find the proper balance. If it were possible, MEP21 would prioritise more physical interaction because looking the constituents in the eyes is more intimate and cannot be substituted by writing text in online platforms. At the same time, MEP21 finds it impossible to express views and broadcast messages to thousands of people without using modern social media solutions. He/she acknowledges that each of the different approaches (virtual, traditional, and physical) has a partial value and social media should be used together with traditional media while also pursuing physical contact with the constituents. MEP1 agrees and sees SMPs as a tool which should be used in conjunction with traditional methods like the personal tour in the constituency, the face-to-face interaction and the shaking of hands.

> 'A large portion of the electorate is still not following the rapid pace of internet development. The digital divide still exists in rural areas and requires us to use physical contact'. MEP1, 12/07/2016.

MEP6 claims it is easier for him/her to have a face-to-face conversation rather than chatting online, but due to having contacts with people outside the constituency or even from abroad, these contacts have to be facilitated by the social media accounts. Quite often, MEP6 likes to call constituents over the phone to have private conversations instead of chatting online. They are pleasantly surprised by this and MEP6 feels that it makes his/her brand even more attractive to the eyes of the constituents. In the end, MEP6 views SMPs as a positive development that requires proper handling and wishes to be able to find more time for engagement with the constituents.

> 'The bridging of the gap requires us to maintain contact with the constituents on a permanent basis'. MEP6, 05/09/2016.

To MEP2 a successful promotional strategy is to use both social media and traditional media to prove that he/she is always present during events of political significance. MEP2 views the EP as a forum for political discussion more than a legislative chamber, and the MEPs must create the impression that they fight for the big political debates rather than for minor issues even if they have national or local importance.

On the other hand, there is a group of MEPs (14, 15, 17, 19, 23 and 24) who remain persistently attached to the physical or face-to-face approach of the constituents, rejecting the extensive use of social media. MEP19 feels that the national political landscape creates by default the obligation to be physically close to the constituents and it is vital that the MEPs must be seen to serve the constituency especially if they want to get re-elected. That is why he/she travels home every week to register his/her presence in the constituency. MEPs 14 & 15 although they feel that their parties adequately promote their work as MEPs, they favour physical contact with the constituents and try to visit various locations in the constituency whenever possible to give speeches and shake hands. MEP15 feels that when it comes to choosing social media or face-to-face interactions, it is the audience that defines the method and both methods (virtual and physical) are offering benefits. He/she prefers direct physical contact because it creates stronger ties than virtual interaction. The way MEP23 approaches constituents online is no different from the way he/she approaches people during face-to-face interactions but agrees that physical communication differs from an online interaction.

> 'Physical contact during live events is part of the role of the representative.
> Online interactions are usually information-based and less intimate'.
> MEP23, 14/07/2017.

MEP24 is cautious when using SMPs and maintains a formal style contrary to face-to-face communication where he/she is more intimate and informal. The MEPs should be willing to have physical individualised contacts because they offer a sense of belonging and act as a psychological boost for the constituents. Similarly to hear in person, the encouragement of the constituents to keep up the good work is very reassuring for the MEPs.

> 'Shaking hands is a natural part of every politician's life'.
> MEP24, 18/07/2017.

MEP17 wants everyone to consider that his/her brand is not that of someone who avoids listening to others or evades confrontation. His/her rationale is always to face the critique of the constituents and respond if added value and good intention exist. However, this is mostly happening in real life during door to door interactions (canvassing) or during gatherings and events, not during social media interactions.

In relation to how much the old-school promotional activities are still used, the tweet analysis presented three relevant categories; MEP interviews, Links to other media and public speeches in social events. The interviews (310 tweets) and the other links to media (230 tweets) indicate the prevalence of traditional methods but also their digital reproduction in a new modern way. The public speeches (60 tweets) are an expression of the inherent need of the MEPs to engage with the public in gatherings and social activities not necessarily linked to their EP duties.

7.3.4 The 'industrial' use of SMPs

An ever-increasing tendency among the MEPs is to embark on the 'industrial' use of their social media accounts. This translates into moving from a spontaneous use of SMPs to an organised, calculated and targeted operation. As MEP2 stressed

> 'Due to the MEPs' limited time, the process of personalising the communication with constituents to create stronger ties can only be materialised following an industrial approach'. MEP2, 13/07/2016.

Meanwhile, MEP12 points that….

> '…as online interactions become almost unavoidable, more systematic use of SMPs by the MEPs is required'. MEP12, 06/09/2016.

To execute this operation some strategic decisions have to be taken about the delegation of platform administration and monitoring to associates, the linkage to experts, journalist and opinion leaders and the systematic exploitation of social media features like sound & image, interactivity, etc.

The tweet analysis is not able to indicate the origin of the tweets, i.e. who uploads them online and whether a series of associates are responsible for the administration of the virtual content in the SMPs. Therefore the industrial use of the platforms cannot be

verified unless the MEPs admit or declare the industrial character of their accounts. The only category from the analysis which clearly indicates a more industrial use of the SMPs is 'Review' because these tweets (14) are related to the review of MEP productivity which is a form of self-assessment that requires an organised, detailed and associate-supported administration of the social media accounts. Without making any assumptions about the origin (industrial or personal) of the remaining tweets in the sample, a total of 555 tweets demonstrate the working activities of the MEPs which can be used to self-assess their annual or mid-term performance.

Regarding the delegation to MEP associates it must be noted that as an isolated activity, it often exists without necessarily pointing to a strategic choice, as it is very common for the busy MEPs to occasionally ask their associates to post something online or even respond to a request. It is the permanent or conscious assignment of social media account operation to the associates, which reflects a strategic choice for the MEPs. With this in mind, the MEPs' responses formulate three groups: MEPs who have full control of the social media accounts with minimal help from associates, MEPs who ask their associates to operate the accounts but retain authorship and control of the published content and MEPs who consult their associates towards the full process of platform operation including content formation.

MEPs 5, 6, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 22 belong to the first category. MEP5 is doing all of the tweeting him/herself and only sometimes on Facebook, allows the associates to upload content whenever he/she is not available. MEPs 6, 13, 16 and 22 administer and use social media accounts on their own without any help from associates being the sole producers of content. They claim that this is their way of having a more personal touch. MEP6 explains that his/her online presence is not extensive enough to require the delegation of online communication to associates. Similarly, MEP14 has only recently started to use SMPs and remains the sole handler of social media accounts, still feeling the need to get updated with the current social media developments. He/she knows that many MEPs have delegated their associates to respond to citizen approaches, but he/she is yet to make strategic choices about the future use of social media. MEP19 administers his/her social media accounts entirely on his/her own because he/she wants

to control the possibility of over-broadcasting, which would most definitely tire social media followers.

MEPs 1, 2, 11, 15 and 24 belong in the second category. MEPs 15&2 have delegated associates to exclusively manage the social media accounts and their personal webpages because of their lack of time due to EP activities, but they always make sure that the published content has their consent retaining full responsibility of all the broadcasts or interactions. MEP11's accounts are monitored continuously by associates who filter the approaches of constituents which are deemed valuable. Then the MEP personally addresses these approaches to apply a more personal type of involvement, especially in cases where the MEP is asked to provide guidance or respond to a request or an appeal. MEP24 maintains accounts administered by associates, e.g. by removing inactive social media followers. On top of followers' administration, there is an annual average of 3000 emails that the associates need to filter. The final say regarding the content comes in both cases from the MEP. MEP1 established the social media accounts long before the beginning of the EP tenure while serving as a national MP. There has always been a personalised use of the accounts, but the associates help with the transition, adaptation and update of the profiles.

Finally, MEPs 3, 10, 12, 20, 21, and 23 form a third category which is equally interesting because it reflects the designed and estimated use of SMPs for branding purposes. MEP21 has designated one of his/her associates to deal with the administration of the social media accounts under partial supervision while MEP20 uses associates to manage the social media accounts fully. Thus the content sometimes is not exclusively that of the MEPs'. Similarly, MEP23 is not the sole producer of online content as the associates are delegated with the responsibility to post material on MEP's behalf. MEP3 chooses to formulate the finalised content after consultation with his/her associates, to ensure that what is broadcasted is in line with the brand, combining partisan and personal standpoints. MEPs 10 & 12 have formulated special teams of associates administering the social media accounts also using social media experts who are responsible for liaising with the MEP about the content, the filtering process and other decisions of interactivity. MEP12 uses a team of three associates to operate social media accounts from the very beginning of his/her online presence. Lately, he/she embarked into managing the posts

and making amendments as the producer of the posted content. Online political discussion is often facilitated by 'satellite' accounts operated by associates who embark upon joint discussions with the constituents and the MEP. Moreover, MEP12 is statistically monitoring the accounts with his/her team of associates by measuring the 'hits' in the profiles as an indication of appeal for the online brand. He/she started with 200 daily hits and is now around 15000.

> 'My intention is to create benchmarks according to which my team will be able to translate the impact of my online presence and how it affects the brand'. MEP12, 06/09/2016.

MEP10 declares dedicated to improving his/her appeal and links the success of the brand to the interpretations produced from analysing social media statistics (views, retweets, shares, etc.).

Another element of the industrial operation of SMPs is that the MEPs use them to approach specialised audiences, which can assist in branding enhancement. Some MEPs find more interesting to tune their social media presence with the interests of journalists, lobbyists, experts and influencers in an effort to attract their attention, make them reproduce their content and thus enhance their brand as politicians who have in-depth knowledge of the issues and their solutions. As a platform, Twitter seems to receive the preference of the MEPs in that respect. MEP12 finds it more important to search and locate the audience of experts and influencers for each topic of interest and then engage with them to receive their suggestions. That is why Twitter is mostly used for interacting with journalists and opinion leaders and Facebook for broadcasting to the constituents. As MEP9 stresses…

> 'Twitter is the place where I can engage with experts and academics that would otherwise be hard to reach and consult with in real life. I can also access journalists to receive news and information outside the mainstream media'. MEP9, 06/09/2016.

MEP8 uses SMPs as a way to attract journalists interested in his/her views, to seek for more details and eventually to reproduce those views in mainstream media. On some occasions, MEP19 targets communication with journalists who are either critical or indifferent about the way he/she is pursuing an issue. Pointing out disparities or bias from the journalists and challenging them, publically also produces publicity enhancement and personal promotion, especially on Twitter. To MEP4, it is equally

rewarding to catch the online attention of journalists for issues of interest. When these issues become popular in public debates, the journalists tend to the MEP as a credible expert.

> 'I became very popular with TTIP. My strategy was to constantly post analyses on TTIP online and at some point, the national media instinctively knew whom to contact whenever they needed to address this topic'. MEP4, 31/08/2016.

A more innovative approach comes from MEP10, who has frequent online contact with people who reside outside the constituency. These persons are mostly experts who relate to the issues which MEP10 addresses in the EP like the EFSI, energy etc. This engagement has precise boundaries and differs from public interactions. After the initial contact, these international participants become a scheduled networking cycle of MEPs-commissioners-DG experts-consultants. This process is called 'bubbling', and the circle of experts communicate online in private channels where no members of the public are allowed except for other associated actors like, e.g. energy producers who may enter the bubble to ask questions.

> 'Social media is not only about communicating with the public. The bubble effect we have created facilitates expert work taking place outside the public sphere. Apart from offering convenience, it improves my profile as a knowledgeable, hi-tech and innovative MEP'. MEP10, 06/09/2016.

The difference between embracing SMPs in a spontaneous manner reacting to news, comments and political developments and using SMPs proactively to achieve specific purposes, is what differentiates the industrial exploitation of social media for branding purposes. MEP2's strategy incorporates partially the use of social media accounts as repositories or redirection routes to traditional media (e.g. newspapers) for the material that he/she produces.

> 'I use my social media accounts as podiums for the reproduction of my published pieces, recorded speeches, video clips, interviews and other traditional media interventions'. MEP2, 13/17/2016.

By exploiting the social media features, MEP2 creates a message transmitted through a never-ending traditional media-social media loop, which reaches different audiences via different mediums. MEP3 uses the social media feature of live coverages of public gatherings and the linking to speeches and interviews. The team of associates edit the

broadcasted material so that the brand broadcasted online is represented by collective office work. MEP6 has started to use images and graphs to make his/her broadcasts more attractive but still emphasises on receiving feedback from the constituents about how they experience this new approach via SMPs. MEP19 is very positive towards the capacity of SMPs to become repositories of policy positions and policy papers, advertising and campaigning material, as well as promoters of activities and gatherings. When it comes to promoting views and positions, he/she uses an industrial method of broadcasting, where a network of delegated associates tag/retweet and generally disseminate further his/her postings to draw attention and provoke broader debate over the issue.

> 'By creating parallel circles of broadcasting, the message expands to wider audiences. It is a good method to make my views more popular than the views of other MEPs'. MEP19, 30/05/2017.

A different form of exploiting platform features comes from MEP11, who was Rapporteur for the TTIP case and used social media accounts to influence fellow MEPs about the topic. By encouraging social media followers and supporters of the TTIP cause to put pressure online on other MEPs, MEP11 turned the SMPs into a pressure mechanism towards his/her own colleagues to receive further support for the report he/she had prepared.

7.3.5 Descriptive features

One of the crucial profile-building decisions the MEPs have to take while using SMPs is the use of descriptive features or else the promotion of professional, geographical, social, cultural or other affiliations which create an attachment with specific portions of the audience. The majority of the MEPs who addressed this issue (2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 20, 21, 22 & 24) disapprove and reject the promotion of qualities or capacities which are unrelated to their role as representatives, their views and ideological stance or at least personality traits useful to fulfil their duties. Some MEPs give emphasis to their views, some other to their accountable work and a few others to their skills and personality. The standard argument of these MEPs is their claim to have an already established brand which would not be benefited from promoting features or properties which could confuse social media followers.

MEPs 3, 20 and 22 believe that the MEPs should put at the forefront of their broadcasts either their political views and ideology or their skills and personality advantages. In MEP20's case, the brand is constructed around a combination of both, but since it has been established ideologically for many years, it is the personal abilities that mostly matter and especially the capacity to offer solutions to complex problems. MEP22 verifies that using descriptive or appearance features to connect with the constituents is not for MEPs with established brands. Having an attractive platform persona is not enough to win the public; online personas and actual personalities should be identical.

> 'The MEPs can achieve the ideal representation of the citizens only through honesty, consistency and realistic reproductions of longstanding ideological views'. MEP22, 11/07/2017.

MEP3 does not claim possession of any descriptive characteristics or automatic affiliations that could be used to enhance the brand online. Inevitably, MEP3 is not targeting specific audiences based on descriptive features, and the only brand that is broadcasted is the one that stems from the work in the EP. Even if he/she possessed features of descriptive nature, MEP3 would not be willing to use them for branding purposes because the constituents should be left to choose their representatives objectively based on their views and working results. MEPs 10 & 24 suggest that relying upon a few narrowing descriptive elements like, e.g. the place of origin or the academic background, would retract their penetration to only a few special groups, and this would not be adequate to get them elected within a unified national constituency. MEP24 comes from a small region with a non-organised supporter base and relying upon, e.g. professional affiliations would not make a difference. As a result, MEP24 is promoting a candidacy that focuses upon specific views about the 'big issues', i.e. economy, society, security and expects from constituents who identify with those views to offer their support.

MEP10, on the other hand, is focusing mostly on the results of accountable work. The committee membership creates thematic affiliations with topics/agents of specific nature, but no MEP should rely exclusively upon these affiliations and forget the importance of the overall EP work. MEP10 also carries some prominent professional and regional affiliations, but those are never used to define the brand. MEP10 concludes that:

> 'I agree that all politics is local politics, but the MEP cannot be targeting specific audiences and expect to be successful as a representative. It is the common good and the value-for-all that matters, not the place of origin or the associations with special audiences'. MEP10, 06/09/2016.

The use of descriptive features online is similarly foreign to MEP2's intentions who uses his/her viewpoints as promotional features, avoiding any effort to improve the brand through impressions of personal nature. Although some politicians prefer to promote descriptive features to attract large numbers of followers online, MEP2 feels it is too late to play the game of 'impressions' because the MEPs with a long-established brand must preserve the character of this brand which the constituents already link to specific standpoints and behaviours. MEP6 bases his/her online brand upon the use of the content, which is purely political and prefers to promote arguments related to the policies. There is no point to promote features related to family, private life or personal history unless the features are linked directly with the political background which in his/her case has already contributed to the existing brand. MEP9 like MEP2 is not using descriptive elements, because he/she is trying to preserve his/her privacy and personal life from interfering with the political activities. As such, he/she tries always to promote positions and views and therefore maintain a brand which is solely associated with political choices. MEP21 is another MEP with an established brand who does not need to promote descriptive characteristics because the brand already matches consistently his/her political views with social activities.

There are, however, some MEPs (4, 8, 12, 13 and 15) who are more receptive to the use of descriptive features under certain circumstances. MEP4 takes into account that the electoral system used in his/her country for the EP elections designates larger constituencies than that for the national elections. He/she then claims that the national political landscape is encouraging constituents to choose candidates based on geographic origin or overall popularity which stems from name recognisability. For that reason, it is crucial for the MEPs to broadcast both a political, ideological or partisan message and a personality-related message. As a result, MEP4 tries to establish affiliations with specific geographical regions into the broader constituency. To do so he/she exploits networks in the home region or demonstrates support for specific sports clubs or groups or events, trying to create special ties with portions of the electorate.

Regarding the feature of origin, MEP15 informs that due to his/her professional background, he/she has worked in various locations establishing widespread connections and networks. This may have helped in the overall effort to get elected, but it is not a feature that gets uniquely promoted or emphasised for branding purposes.

MEP8 has a background as a famous athlete and knows that regardless of how little he/she promotes the feature, many constituents feel more related to the athletic background than to his/her political views. The interesting point is that some political opponents mock this historical affiliation to sports, claiming it is a cause for his/her lack of 'expertise' or capacity to serve the constituents. Although not actively promoting this feature, MEP8 must administer its existence while reassuring the constituents that former athletes do deserve to serve as MEPs. In any case, MEP8 finds it unethical to spoil an opponent's brand because of a feature which cannot be removed.[19] On the same line, MEP13 thinks that some MEPs find themselves by default identified by descriptive features, even when they are not making an intentional effort to use them. It is the constituents themselves who sometimes attach these features to their representatives.

> 'I grew up in a rural environment, and I have always been involved in issues of national heritage and culture. Although I try to demonstrate my interest and my capacity to work on other policies, the constituents pigeonhole me as a person with a farming background and relate to that more than anything else'. MEP13, 06/09/2016.

MEP13 admits that when it comes to collecting votes or during campaigning timeframes, linking with specific groups becomes valuable and these features emerge more often and more consciously. Finally, MEP12 has an established brand from previous governmental positions and does not feel the need to approach diverse audiences through descriptive affiliations. Nevertheless, he/she admits that there is a firm regional affiliation with a specific territory which is highly populated and ensures his/her election within a unified national constituency. In other words, a descriptive affiliation (place of origin) although not promoted, is always present.[20] For this reason, MEP12 thinks that descriptive features can be beneficial if the audience or the constituency is large. The

[19] See in 2.4.2 how some features are more permanent than other.
[20] See previous footnote.146

larger the audience/electorate, the higher the need for simultaneous associations and links with various groups.

The tweet analysis seems to be supportive of the MEPs who claim that they are not making use of descriptive features. Only 253 relevant tweets (7%) were spotted in the sample concerning exclusive affiliations with groups. On the other hand, it must be noted that there are many indirect ways to designate or promote descriptive elements that the tweet collection may not have been able to pinpoint.

7.4 The prevailing brands

The MEPs' motivations and the branding strategies they apply during their social media endeavours, rendezvous with the MEPs' perceptions of the gap-bridging capacity of SMPs. This takes place in the intersection of two representational profiles; the 'European Expert' brand and the brand of 'One-of-Us'. The interviewed MEPs revealed the tendency to choose one of those two behavioural models which are reproduced online via their social media accounts. The first one accepts as default and elevates the expertise of the MEPs, considering they are: people with more profound knowledge and inside information on the functions of the EU, realistic decision-makers who understand what is best for the EU citizens and potential educators of the public about EU issues and policies. The second profile refers to the qualities of the MEPs as human beings: genuine and sincere concern for the citizens and understanding of their needs, possession and demonstration of qualities such as honesty, integrity and ethics and most importantly the desire to act, speak and feel like fellow citizens and everyday people without the need to exercise their power position. As the interviews revealed, these two behavioural types or brands are not mutually exclusive, and elements from both can co-exist, but the majority of the MEPs tend to perceive themselves as adopters of the one or the other.

7.4.1 Educating as European Experts

As MEP1 states, the decision to assume the character of an expert is a dilemma that all MEPs face when shaping their political profile online. Keeping in mind that the public

has limited knowledge of their full role, the MEPs decide whether they will claim expertise to justify the soundness of the EU decision-making process and whether they will educate the constituents about the EU policies. As MEPs 12 & 19 suggest, the status of the European expert is widely accepted among the MEPs. To MEP14 the expertise stems from the MEPs' ability to be closer to the sources of information and the decision-making mechanisms of the EU. To MEP19, it stems from the combination of having internal knowledge of EU processes and experience in policy design. According to MEP4, the MEPs who claim to be European experts, are usually those with an established political brand or previous EP experience, i.e. figures that are publically recognised. In MEP12's view, there are two sub-categories; those who intend to pursue a long-lasting career in the EU either by remaining MEPs or by becoming EU Commissioners and those who want to transfer to the national political scene carrying European best-practice knowledge. In both cases, accumulating the EP experience and claiming European expertise, are essential features for their brand. MEP23 favours expertise as an indication of the ability to clarify EU policies and processes to the constituents. The MEP wants to be considered a person of knowledge and capacity, who can communicate EU developments and foremost one who distinguishes what is essential and valuable for the constituents' wellbeing. As MEP19 points out, expert knowledge must not only improve constituents' understanding, but it must also be able to generate added value for them. To MEP12 using SMPs while collaborating with national MPs is an effective combination to disseminate knowledge to the constituents, but when it comes to value, this comes from emphasising to the public the importance of realistic solutions. As MEP10 notes, because of the crisis, there are now two opposing political narratives in the EU about people's quality of life; one follows the reasoning which favours the promotion of practical solutions and reforms for the future and the other embraces radical/populist voices which suggest unrealistic alternatives.

MEP10 is a firm believer and supporter of the concept of expertise in politics because the MEPs need to have a speciality rather than pretend to know everything. No MEP knows in-depth all of the current EU issues, so MEP10 tries to be result-oriented for the topics of interest. The MEPs should communicate on the basis of results, not based on claims. Otherwise, there will always be gaps between the member states, the EU institutions and the local regions. To be result-oriented means to be a focused expert

offering rational solutions to the problems of EU citizens, convincing them that their representatives act in their best interest. To this point, MEP6 clarifies that in real life, the MEPs do not act as experts who know every single detail in all of the areas of work from the first day of their election. Inevitably though, the MEPs become experts in their chosen areas of interest by exchanging knowledge and assisting each other in a complementary way (especially the MEPs from the same national party). Even so, as MEP16 reveals, most MEPs remain virtually unaware of the issues, views and national problems that colleagues from other countries deal with.

> 'The brand of the European Expert is not a credible one. How can it be when many MEPs delegate such a large amount of activities and trust to their associates? Even voting in the Plenary is often the result of the associates' suggestions'. MEP16, 04/05/2017.

The dispute is further supported by MEP5's view that as social media is becoming the norm and younger people get more and more involved, they formulate their own expertise, becoming more sceptical to other experts, especially since in the SMPs the experts, the non-experts and those without a clue are obliged to coexist. In any case, as MEP20 suggests, the ability to be influential to the views of the constituents is a feature that goes hand in hand with excellence and expertise. MEP7 agrees that one of the most attractive features for the constituents is to feel that they are represented by the 'best' possible MEPs and ….

> '…in most cases, being the best is associated with possessing the status of an expert'. MEP7, 05/09/2016.

MEPs 1 & 12 would like to use SMPs more extensively as an educating tool, but their experience so far has not been positive. MEP1 thinks that the constituents are generally unwilling to receive tutoring about the legislative process or the design of EU policies. The fact that everybody online can claim to be an expert makes the 'educating' process almost unfeasible. MEP12 agrees that to brand an educating attitude is like wasting time for no benefit. The internet is an informative medium, and SMPs can become valuable depending on how the MEPs use them, but the results so far are minimal. Only a few ears remain open and willing to absorb knowledge. The majority of constituents are not interested to hear what is realistic and practical; they prefer empty promises.

> ‘In online democracy, it is not always the accomplishments or the ideology of the worthy ones that are appreciated, and in this respect, SMPs are not as democratic as they could be’. MEP12, 06/09/2016.

Similarly, MEP20 avoids educating constituents online because even when this takes the simple form of providing transparent information, it cannot guarantee that the constituents will formulate their views in an unbiased way. Likewise, assuming the role of an educating European ‘expert’ is seen by MEP2 as a secondary task. Having a well-rooted brand MEP2 thinks that although expertise can enhance the MEPs’ image as qualified and productive representatives, it cannot guarantee a successful persuasion campaign about the policy issues, especially those of regional and local importance. The MEPs’ natural tendency to convince the public for the validity and prevalence of their arguments, is better suited when the SMPs are used to offer accountable information.

MEP7 claims like MEP2 to have an established brand which is not that of a professional politician. He/she considers that the expertise in EU affairs is an element of this brand, and he/she always verifies it when interacting with the constituents. This element is not exploited because of the MEP’s need to improve the political appeal or because of the pursuit of future electoral gains (MEP7 claims to have no intention to run again as a candidate). Consequently, MEP7’s interventions in the public sphere are by default didactic, focusing on the improvement of citizens’ understanding. Feeling confident about his/her expertise on the European policies, MEP6 loves to educate and advise the constituents, but his/her experience so far is more physical than online. Explaining to schools, unions, groups or individuals what the EU is all about and why the policies exist, is something he/she continually performs through visits, speeches, conferences and meetings in Brussels or the constituency. When it comes to online interaction, MEP6 thinks that the audience hides behind a persona in which case his/her efforts may go in vain. MEP5 sees no point to try and promote expertise as an element of superiority. From time to time and depending on the topic of discussion, an MEP may have to use his/her expert knowledge of European issues to convince the constituents. Especially when online users reproduce 'outlandish' arguments, MEP5 feels obliged to correct the misinformation they have and if they insist he/she then removes their comments from his/her social media accounts to avoid the spreading of this misinformation.

MEP8 does not embark upon discussions with an educative tendency because they turn to a never-ending game of impressions, where the MEP uses his/her power position to impose an 'inscribed-in-stone' view, and the constituent rejects the view because of the imposition. The solutions that one 'expert' MEP calls politically realistic are in reality, subjective and relevant to circumstances, therefore insisting that these solutions are the only feasible ones, could end up in public conflict. Educating the constituents about the EU must be linked to argumentative persuading, not to using the power position to impose individual views. The latter usually occurs online in the form of intense broadcasting. Insisting on a view with constant repetition of the argument is very different from presenting the argument and receiving feedback during a debate online. MEP11 never tries to exploit his/her power position to influence the views of the constituents. Although among the MEP's duties is to advise the constituents how to improve their lives, how to become good citizens exercising their political rights and how to scrutinise the EU policies with their judgement, MEP11 would never lecture them about the prevalence of specific views. Similarly, MEP3 has the tendency and desire to approach the constituents with an educative manner only if this translates to the transferring of his/her executive knowledge and experience.

> 'The MEPs should not attempt to educate if educating means to impose their views from a power position'. MEP3, 13/07/2016.

It is the broader access to a large pool of information that makes MEP17 capable of transferring knowledge to educate the constituents, not the intrinsic effort to distort views and preferences. The latter is bound to create a confrontation with the constituents. For similar reasons, MEP14 avoids publically educating the constituents via social media accounts about what he/she considers to be politically feasible and prefers the use of private channels like Facebook Messenger for that matter.

7.4.2 Sharing knowledge as One of Us

In MEP4's experience, when someone tries to promote expertise without having an established brand, he/she gets ignored or forgotten. According to MEP4 the antidote to electing as MEPs celebrity personalities with well-established brands is the promotion of a political message of national relevance which supersedes the persons involved. This is why MEP4 tries to promote a brand based upon the notion of an 'ordinary' citizen, a

family man with kids who got inflicted by the crisis and the austerity measures, a person with a mortgage and generally one with a life which is similar to that of the average constituent. Such a politician can only be assessed based on his/her views, ideas and actions. To partially dispute this, MEP8 states that he/she entered politics with an established popularity brand but still does not consider him/herself to be an expert. Expertise should not be defined only by someone's past experience because it is not possible for an MEP to be knowledgeable about every single topic that exists.

For this reason, MEP8 will only discuss online topics that he/she knows about otherwise prefers to remain silent. All of his/her social media broadcasts are related to political views and content and remain consistent in time. MEPs 11 & 13 like MEP8 are not considering themselves as European experts and prefer an approaching style which does not exploit the power position on the basis of 'expertise' but suggests sharing views and arguments just like ordinary citizens do. MEP13 considers as a critical online feature to be more intimate than formal and to build personal relationships online with the constituents who choose to interact. This requires an approach which is 'down to earth'. MEP13 finds fascinating that the content he/she broadcasts from the unofficial (personal) social media account receives higher response and attention from the constituents than the content posted with the MEP identity (official MEP account). People like to think that politicians are ordinary persons with normal routine behaviour and relate more with human expressions than with official broadcasts of measured tone and formal touch. Strengthening the argument of the humane approach MEP13 states:

> 'The MEPs are, after all, humans and should not be expected to know everything. I prefer to express myself online as an active citizen, not as a professional politician, and I am not ashamed to declare my lack of awareness for a topic. If the constituents have more knowledge for an issue than I do, then I will gladly learn from them'. MEP13, 06/09/2016.

MEP13's views the partisan affiliation as helpful to achieve this intimacy because some specific elements of the party brand (equality, fairness, genuine interest for social issues) are by default implied through the social media accounts, offering moral superiority in the eyes of the constituents. MEP17's is similarly comfortable to consult with the constituents online in order to gain information for issues not known in detail. Transferring knowledge to the constituents without distorting their views is a priority

but also being prepared to become the student should be part of the brand that is transmitted online. MEP15 does not consider him/herself to be a European expert although he/she agrees that has access to private information and awareness of the decision-making process more than the average citizen. He/she wants to be known for being approachable and accessible and promotes a simple, friendly and natural style of communication. He/she considers him/herself to be one of the many who express views online and the constituents who agree in principle can vote for him/her without expecting to receive any flattering or pleasant broadcasts. No effort will be given to creating an attractive persona and MEP15 will keep broadcasting according to beliefs and ideas just like an everyday citizen.

On a more extreme positioning, MEP22 mocks the argument that the MEPs should be seen as European Experts. He/she thinks there is no real expertise among the MEPs and most of them are ignorant, voting in the Plenary without knowing what they vote for. Only a handful of MEPs have in-depth knowledge of their role and purpose in the EP, MEP22 concludes. On a milder interpretation, MEP16 believes that there can be no real experts regarding the EU issues because there are thousands of different expressions of the EU and it is not possible for someone to have a collective knowledge of all of them. It is natural for the constituents to assume that an MEP may be an expert, but MEP16 tries to suppress this impression by making the constituents view him/her as an informed citizen who knows what he/she is talking about.

> 'My transmitted message is that I am always present and available, willing to listen and capable of offering information and solutions without being an authoritative figure or something fancier than what is reflected publically. I believe that this is the profile that the constituents look for in their representatives. My brand is that of an ordinary citizen who has been assigned with a political responsibility'.
>
> MEP16, 04/05/2017.

For that exact reason, he/she demonstrates a consistent behaviour in SMPs, being open and friendly to all approaches and seeking further individualised interaction with constituents who have something interesting to say. MEP17 is reluctant to accept that the MEPs form a unique caste as producers of EU policy. The MEPs are everyday people with increased responsibilities and access to a wider pool of decision-making information. Some of them possess the knowledge and accumulated experience that

normal constituents may not have but using this expertise is not a method to establish a power position; it is the way to enlighten the constituents with practical and useful information. Especially during discussions online for issues like TTIP and CETA, MEP17 had to be almost cynical about the capacities of the EP to produce political change and what these agreements would mean in practice for the citizens. An interesting point raised from MEPs 17 & 21 is the argument that an MEP has to live like his/her constituents in order to understand their problems. MEP21 believes that any politician should seek to demonstrate a way of living which the public finds compatible with their brand. The constituents should consider the MEPs as normal everyday human beings with a public life which is consistent with their ideology. The political/ideological background must be coherent with the typical everyday behaviour, e.g. a socialist MEP should not be uploading pictures of a luxurious lifestyle. This is also important for reasons of public-spending and financing transparency. MEP17 is known for being accessible, living a life which is in line with his/her ideological positions.

> 'If you want to be seen as one of them, you have to live like one of them. I can walk down the streets and associate with everyday people because they know I am one of them'. MEP17 11/05/2017.

His/her profile is by default that of an ordinary citizen, so there is no need to highlight any expertise. It is impossible to know everything and an MEP has to rely upon others for a variety of issues; choosing the right associates to complete the tasks is equally important.

> 'The impression of knowing-it-all that some MEPs have online is only a persona without real depth. Expert decisions require expert associates more than they require expert knowledge. An MEP's common sense and relevant background can do 'the job' as long as the right people are in place'.
> MEP17, 11/05/2017.

MEP3 is not using SMPs to promote the profile of the 'admirable MEP' who outperforms in every aspect and has knowledge of every EU issue. The SMPs can become a means for the dissemination of verifiable information. The MEPs are not by default experts. Eventually, through continuous experience, they may become experts on the issues they have immediate involvement with. Moreover, there will always be influences affecting their judgement like e.g. political or partisan interests. The MEP's role is not to tell the constituents what to do; it is to create informed citizens by providing information and

processes of discussion. The MEPs are not defenders of the absolute truth who insert their views into constituents' minds. It is the constituents' responsibility to choose the representatives who can best fulfil this role. The constituents need to acquire objective information and use it to form their judgements. Eventually, some will follow the realistic path and those who pray for magic solutions will follow the populist voices. MEP15 supports the use of SMPs but reminds that SMPs can also be used to manipulate public opinion. With this in mind, he/she would only accept to assume an educative role about the EU policies, if this was to amend assumptions created by fake data and misinformation, not to impose to the constituents what is right or wrong.

MEP24 thinks that he is 'selling' him/herself online based on the profile of an opinionated, argumentative, honest and trustworthy person and not a partisan watchdog and the constituents correspond to this brand positively. The brand has nothing to do with considering him/herself as a European expert, but because of previous academic background, MEP24 often tends to behave like an educator advising the constituents to have realistic expectations. MEP24 feels there are two significant issues in the concept of constituent education. The first is that the EP processes must be thoroughly explained (e.g. let the public know that EP reports do not have legislative power). The second is that internal behaviours in the EP need to be clarified (e.g. it is in the MEP's interest not to declare a negative vote in advance before a report is compiled because the Rapporteur will exclude his/her views/suggestions from consideration when drafting the report. If still opposing the content, the MEP can abstain instead of giving a negative vote). This training in the inner works of the EP is required because very often the constituents fail to look behind the MEP actions and they criticise them online, demanding further explanations for their actions in the EP.

MEP13 justifies the educative tendency by admitting that sometimes he/she uses the expertise stemming from the MEP position to influence constituents' views but not in the form of political tactics.

> 'Influencing public opinion is a natural outcome and a normative feature of politicians which takes place with or without social media. SMPs make it easier because they are convenient and cost-effective'. MEP13, 06/09/2016.

Therefore, to have an educative approach towards the constituents is not a consciously manipulative action; it comes naturally as the result of people's need to ask questions and the MEP's obligation to offer convincing answers. MEP9 feels that whenever an MEP expresses an opinion online, he/she paves a path or a direction for the constituents who may agree or disagree. In this respect, persuading constituents about his/her views does not necessarily impose the adoption of the expert brand. MEP21 considers his/her views to be by default 'expert' for those issues for which he/she has privileged information due to his/her position in the EP. Nevertheless, he/she would never embark upon a campaign to manipulate constituents' views with an 'educative' approach or a 'know-it-all' style. During social media interactions, MEP21 often feels the need to explain the scope of the EP and how it relates to EU policies because there is considerable ignorance among the constituents about even the fundamental functions of the EU, the processes, the institutions, their role, etc. Whenever this happens, it has the nature of an explanatory process, not the character of undisputed authenticity.

> 'Bridging the gap with the constituents will not come by applying authoritative expertise or by using an academic approach from a power position. It will come through the clarification of rational policies and the demolition of populist myths'. MEP21, 20/06/2017.

7.5 Conclusion

This final chapter of research findings focused on the motivations of the MEPs to pursue a broadcasting behaviour with a mixture of online interactions towards generating strong brand-building attachments to the constituents. The chapter started by presenting the main MEP motivations which are the consolidation of a loyal follower base with potential future rewards, the expanding of the supporter base through the penetration of new audiences and the exploitation of the promotional advantages of ICT in the safeguarding of an attractive brand. Then the chapter continued with the strategies the MEPs apply online like the balancing of the party message with the personal message, the customisation of online behaviour for campaigning purposes, the successful mix of physical and virtual presence, the industrial use of the SMPs and finally the allowance of descriptive features as a pathway to branding. The focus of the chapter

was to determine how the motivation of the MEPs to interact online relates to their incentive to automate their association to the constituents under a framework of loyalty which ensures the MEPs' capacity to be influential. Moreover, if this motivation expresses itself in harmony with the MEPs' representational duties via the application of two representation profiles. As in the previous chapters, the application of the tweet analysis helped to allocate MEPs' online activities into categories for a clearer understanding of the historic MEP behaviour.

CHAPTER 8 – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction

The final chapter reviews the findings presented in the four previous chapters (4, 5, 6 and 7) from a closer angle and highlights explanatory associations considering the relevant literature. Following the thesis structure, it begins with findings related to the post-crisis landscape of online political communication. The interview findings are combined with the findings from the analysis of Twitter content, to draw useful inferences, first by presenting conflicts and limitations, which are then addressed with ideas for future research. Then the findings are interlinked into a common framework that associates accountability, policy discussion and branding. A policy recommendation for the EP suggests the establishment of an institutional participation platform. The end of the chapter and the thesis is providing concluding remarks and draws the boundaries of an online participatory framework for the MEPs.

8.2 Deconstructing the social media landscape

One of the research questions addresses the extent of the crisis effect upon the intention of the MEPs to interact with the constituents online and how the parameters of the social media landscape (internal and external) affect these interactions. The interviews revealed a set of internal and external parameters which influence the level and quality of participation in social media. The external parameters are related to the influence of the crisis in the disassociation of the citizens, the fragmentation of the public sphere, the rising Euroscepticism, the variety of electoral systems in the researched states, the limitation of MEP resources and the internal EP processes. Similarly, there have been parameters which are internal to social media like the design of the SMPs, the online audience synthesis, the quality of audience contributions, the constituents' need for sentiment expression, the level of noise & trolling and the inherent flaws & dangers of the platforms. The parameter-mix that the MEPs from crisis-inflicted states have to take into account when engaging online is not ideal, and many

of the interviewed MEPs used the word 'toxic' to characterise the existing internal/external landscape.

According to the MEPs, the financial crisis disturbed the political system in the inflicted states setting a mode of permanent tension and polarised confrontation. The political system is still trying to find a balance, and the representatives (national and European) have unwillingly assumed the responsibility to defuse the tensions by absorbing the negative sentiment expressed online by constituents. This sentiment (mostly anger and disappointment) stems from the deterioration of constituents' wellbeing, which was wounded by austerity policies suggested from the EU and international organisations like the IMF. The lack of consistency demonstrated by politicians via ideological U-turns and decision swings[21] further added to the landscape toxicity. The loss of consistency and credibility wounded the integrity and stained the brand of many MEPs. The deterioration of the political climate as indicated by the decline in the volume of online engagement and the poor quality of the discourse facilitated the establishment of a permanent state of suspicion and confrontation which favoured the exchange of verbal quotes instead of arguments. The crisis atmosphere and the disengagement of the public left the ground open to Eurosceptic ideas to circulate from centres which used fake news, populist arguments and conspiracy theories to distort further the balance in the system. Trolls and malicious accounts appeared online producing noise and obstructing the well-intended individuals from participating meaningfully as the disoriented citizens' message got lost along the way. The common observation is that the 'middle ground' of participants is now missing, and the current polarisation is a disincentive to sustain a robust online engagement. The MEPs themselves failed to communicate their work adequately. In this respect, the contribution of the MEPs online remains incomplete because the platforms are not capable on their own to reverse the anti-EU populist narrative.

The association of the MEPs with the overall disapproval of the constituents for EU-related things should be seen as a result of the unsuccessful economic performance in the crisis-inflicted states. It is in line with the 'fair-weather phenomenon' of Eichenberg

[21] A situation which is now internationally known with a Greek argot term. For details see www.ft.com/content/fc127c40-b8ab-11e7-8c12-5661783e5589

& Dalton (1993), which describes the tendency of EU citizens to like the EU when the national economy prospers and to dislike it during periods of crisis. E.g. the entrance of Greece in the Eurozone in 2000 was greeted with public enthusiasm from the Greek citizens, yet the same audience fifteen years later instinctively blamed the EU and the austerity reforms once the debt crisis consolidated (Clements et al., 2014). As Hix (2008) mentions reviewing Easton's (1975) ideas, there is a conflict between 'affective' and 'utilitarian' support. Affective support reflects the approval of a scheme based on principle and goodwill, whereas utilitarian support is the outcome of calculation (political or financial) about the benefits of the scheme. Therefore, wanting in principle to be part of the EU does not exclude criticising the EU once the harmful effects of the crisis start affecting the public welfare. Because of the complexity of the crisis, it is easier for the average EU citizen to blame the EU (and its political personnel) for being a structure that failed to protect the citizens from the crisis. The impression that European solidarity has not been applied efficiently or that some EU states have benefited from the austerity and the loss of the other members are views related to utilitarian calculations (Hix, 2008:58). This should be kept in mind when reviewing the parameters that define the contemporary mediascape based upon the claims of the MEPs in chapter 4.

The quality of the platform participants affects and characterises the pursued online interactions regardless of their type, or intention. The MEPs take for granted their quality, but when asked about the synthesis or the quality of their counterparts, they exclaim that the people they engage with are either friendly supporters or vindictive trolls. In either case, this is a biased self-selected sample of the citizenry with limited breadth. Close to these opposing groups, there is a group of experts, technocrats and journalists (mainly on Twitter) who interact in SMPs for professional reasons. Regarding the features of this audience, the MEPs agree that apart from the experts, the others are people of various ages, without particular conformity, not highly specialised, having a moderate political interest but getting easily bored, i.e. what someone would call 'the average citizen'. This impression contradicts Larsson & Moe (2011) who supported that the majority of engaging individuals in SMPs were either members of the elite or had already access to the political arena as participants or observers, i.e. they were not what someone would call 'mainstream' constituents.

The MEPs also pinpointed how the electoral system can affect online interactions by defining the topics for discussion or the broadcasting style. To get elected in a nation-wide constituency, the MEPs require increased exposure and have to focus on the 'big picture' more than on the local interests. This can be a disincentive for the MEPs to attend online individualised interactions with the constituents, and their broadcasts may remain generically informative. If on the other hand the MEPs get elected in a local constituency it may be required to promote both their work and their personality features to create ties and attachments with the local electorate. Furthermore, in a nationwide constituency, the MEPs must find a way to become known throughout the state by promoting their brand in any way possible. The candidates with established brands (e.g. celebrity candidates) may not have this need urgently. The incumbent MEPs suggested that the potential of new celebrity candidates replacing the experienced MEPs, in the long run, is bad for the quality of representation. Overall, when the electoral system allows constituents to choose their candidates, the ties with them are strengthened, and the people feel more comfortable to set topics for discussion via the SMPs.

The various disincentives for MEPs to use SMPs are counterbalanced by a series of benefits that emerge when SMPs are compared to the mainstream media. These benefits differ among the researched themes of accountability, policy discussion and branding. From the accountability point of view, SMPs are cost-effective and dispersive, filling the gaps of information that traditional media leave exposed intentionally or by mistake. The interactivity of SMPs allows the modification of misinformed views and the use of evidence and facts against the distortion of truth and propaganda. For some MEPs, the SMPs are a normative development which issues new civic responsibilities. Their natural interactivity facilitates direct engagements without the need for bureaucratic logistics, allowing the unobstructed exchange of information and views. This is motivating enough to bring constituents at the forefront of policymaking, where traditional media are slow and require significant levels of trust to be reached in advance. Moreover, the journalistic priorities for domestic issues leave little room for EU topics to be highlighted as much as they deserve; thus, they always remain second-

order in the consciousness of the people who end up reproducing online content and arguments formulated by traditional media.

According to the interviewed MEPs, the quality of online interactions is biased, spreading from warm praise to insulting critique, with minimal contributions and inferior arguments. The issues are addressed superficially, and the views expressed are highly opinionated and not fact-based, reproducing negative stereotypes. For a small number of MEPs, this is somehow preferable to the editing and suffocating terms imposed to them by the mainstream media. However, for the majority of MEPs, the expression of negative sentiment throughout the crisis time has overshadowed any thoughts of fruitful engagement at least until the crisis is entirely over. As a result, the MEPs are taking sides as either optimists (Idealists), sceptics (Pragmatists) or pessimists/indifferent (Cynical), maintaining or retracting their online presence accordingly. A mutual argument for all sides is that the well-intended constituents are disinclined to offer their views online because the SMPs turn into chambers of abuse and propaganda. The Pragmatists accept this as an unavoidable reality and adapt to it only sporadically requesting the introduction of rules and filters that may control the populist distortions. The Idealists remain (almost romantically) loyal to seeking out and highlighting the productive contributions of the few within the toxic landscape. The Cynical consider SMPs to be clustered by keyboard-warriors who have turned them into fields for the reproduction of traditional media pathogenies. To their eyes, SMPs legitimise a nihilistic political behaviour which spills over to the layers of the society with adverse effects. Thus, their use is only acceptable on the basis of personal promotion and potential rewards.

The three previous approaches are not differentiated by choice of platform. All of the researched MEPs agree that Twitter and Facebook are the two prevalent SMPs which have a series of attractive features. Twitter is seen as generally more formal, synchronous and unbiased attracting a variety of audiences. It is impression-generating and individualised but also more susceptible to noise and trolls. Facebook is informal, attracting mostly supporters and friends, less synchronous but also more controlled, and it allows more space for broadcasts. The character limit of Twitter is viewed as a disincentive to produce and discuss complex arguments, although some conversation

and opinion expression are feasible. This view wants MEPs to prefer Facebook for lengthy commentaries, descriptions, articles or media reproductions and Twitter for instant reaction to developments, forwarding of evidence links, opinion expression, personalised requests and expert approaches. The study of Larsson & Moe (2011) claimed that Twitter was more appropriate for the dissemination of political content than for debates. In any case, according to Baumgartner & Morris (2010), the hope for increasing political participation of the disengaged citizens is not valid in any of the SMPs as social media participants tend to engage no more than the users of traditional media do.

Finally, the allocation of resources is a critical issue for the MEPs who view their online participation as a form of 'investment'. For some Cynical and Pragmatists, this investment is based upon the return of personal rewards; for the Idealists, it is about the added value of constituents' policy proposals. As Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2013) state, the extent of the use of social media by candidates is relevant to the resources they can allocate. The resources in scarcity are time and associates; indirectly, it is also capital in the sense that the more the associates, the larger their payroll. However, the MEPs are mostly interested in time management as time is the only resource they cannot have in abundance because of the variety of working obligations and duties they perform. The increase of associates is feasible only when the national parties provide supporting personnel. The limited time is also an explanation for the lack of substantial debates as many MEPs avoid discussions that can last for long. The use of the SMPs on an industrial scale with delegations to associates is an obvious answer, but as it demands a more labour-intensive approach, it also requires a strategic view on the overall approach of social media.

8.3 Associations and limitations

8.3.1 Conflicts and revelations from the analysis of data

Apart from the 24 interviews which were conducted and transcribed, a total of 11307 tweets were collected and analysed. From these, 9873 were categorised according to

their content in categories which represented some of the most usual activities that MEPs perform online or the most common material they upload. Among other, these categories refer to Articles, Amendments, EP Questions, EP interventions, EP news, EP work, Events, Feedback, Interviews, Links to SM, Links to TM, Live Broadcasts, Meetings, Campaigns, Commentaries, Party Work, Press Conferences, Reports, Reviews, Speeches, Statements, Summaries, Updates, Conversations, Votes.

		AC	PD	BR
		3357	2904	3612
totals	11307	9873		
	collected	categorised		

Table 8.3.1a Summary of categories and theme allocation

The following table 8.3.1b is presenting how the tweets are allocated per MEP among the three themes of Accountability (AC), Policy Discussion (PD) and Branding (BR).

MEPs	Tweets collected from 21/9/15 to 02/02/16	Tweets not categorised (discarded)	Tweets categorised in themes	AC	PD	BR
MEP1	2442	241	2201	815	544	842
MEP2	475	169	306	84	113	109
MEP3	0	0	0	0	0	0
MEP4	677	79	598	166	160	272
MEP5	1071	88	983	260	301	422
MEP6	550	71	479	184	127	168
MEP7	520	15	505	205	93	207
MEP8	324	24	300	113	98	89
MEP9	235	7	228	101	60	67
MEP10	1350	197	1153	413	423	317
MEP11	254	15	239	95	79	65
MEP12	250	28	222	74	67	81
MEP13	343	58	285	85	54	146
MEP14	232	19	213	55	61	97
MEP15	0	0	0	0	0	0
MEP16	552	181	371	128	139	104
MEP17	238	16	222	77	83	62
MEP18	123	1	122	46	34	42
MEP19	649	189	460	118	157	185
MEP20	1	0	1	0	1	0
MEP21	499	16	483	183	158	142

MEP22	**73**	**10**	**63**	**21**	**11**	**31**
MEP23	**449**	**10**	**439**	**134**	**141**	**164**
MEP24	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
	11307	**1434**	**9873**	**3357**	**2904**	**3612**

Table 8.3.1b Allocation of tweets per theme and MEP

The first observation from the combination of interview findings and tweet analysis is that some categories of online activity need to be carefully observed as they could belong to more than a single theme. For example, broadcasting information about MEPs' work in the Committees (EP work) is something that they consider essential for transparency and legitimation which can be materialised when they use SMPs as repositories or as bi-directional channels, an activity which eventually influences their consistency (AC). However, disseminating their EP work is allowing people to create topics for discussion which stimulate feedback and can lead to suggestions for policy formation (PD). Finally, providing information about EP work is a way an MEP can get the message across that he/she is work-oriented and productive, elements vital for the establishment of an attractive brand (BR). In order to avoid replication, a process of content evaluation took place before allocating a tweet in the categories for those tweets which could be considered as serving more than a single function.

The second observation has to do with the use of retweets (RT). Although the MEPs were asked about retweeting, they made no particular reference to how much or for what reasons they retweet. As a result, the use and significance of the retweets were not identified during the interviews. During the analysis, it turned out that more than one-third of the Accountability tweets (AC), more than one-fifth of the policy discussion tweets (PD) and almost one-quarter of the branding tweets (BR) were retweets of distinct thematic nature. There was a total of 2417 retweets which were allocated in the three themes. Considering the MEPs' statements during the interviews that Retweeting is not an endorsement, these RTs mostly have an informational character without affecting or altering the motivations and the strategies of the MEPs.

The third observation has to do with the number of uncategorised tweets. A total of 1434 tweets or almost 13% of the collected tweets were not categorised to a specific

activity or theme because these tweets are not related to politics, at least in an obvious way. Some are mentions of account names, fragmented phrases, personal messages, greetings, wishes, references to local news, poems, quotes from books, unrelated retweets, etc. This volume is not negligible for social media accounts which are supposed to be professional. One can only wonder if this reflects the informal character that MEPs give to their SMP accounts or if it is a result of indifference, frustration and fatigue from the toxicity of the landscape. Furthermore, it is a finding that contradicts the MEPs claims that they avoid the publication of personal, non-professional comments in their official accounts. For the record, the MEPs with most of these uncategorised tweets were MEPs 1, 16 and 19 who are characterised by an online style of intimacy and friendliness.

A fourth observation is that after the content analysis, some of the MEPs' claims became less valid as if the MEPs expressed during the interviews wishful thinking rather than impressions from previous experience. More precisely, the activity of participating in the drafting of an Initiative Report[22] which is used to spark conversation about a policy issue in the Committees and then is forwarded to the Commission was mentioned by several MEPs. Although it is something that the MEPs are active with, no collected content during the examined period made any reference to such an activity. Another similar result comes from the contribution of the MEPs to Amendments. Although this is another essential EP activity, it was reflected only in six cases from three MEPs. Also, the use of online Polls, which was mentioned during the interviews as an informal method to collect public opinion was not spotted among the collected tweets. More importantly, the requesting/encouraging of constituents to come forward with ideas and proposals about the EU policies was only applied by four MEPs. This refutes MEPs' claim that they always encourage constituents' contributions by inviting them to participate in the policy formation process. Finally, the strategy of the MEPs to invite the constituents to redirect public online conversations to the private sphere (virtual or physical, e.g. by using email, telephone call, etc.), was only spotted in two cases, hardly noticeable to verify the claim that the MEPs frequently mix different forms of interaction. Some of the smallest collections of tweets refer to the use of official Reports and Summaries of work.

[22] For a definition visit https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/9-503-0403?transitionType=Default&contextData=%28sc.Default%29

It is not so much the limited size of these activities that matters but the fact that both these categories represent useful working functions in the EP. Taking into account that Amendments and Initiative Reports are also scarce, a pattern emerges where the MEPs avoid communicating with the constituents about the essence of their EP work as expressed through formal procedures and evidence.

A fifth finding is about the case of the MEPs requesting information from the constituents. This has only appeared in seven cases, not enough to justify the claim that SMPs are used as bi-directional channels of information. Moreover, activities related to the efforts of the MEPs for self-assessment expressed in the form of productivity reviews that engage followers for feedback and verification, are also scarce. The scenery changes when the focus is on branding activities as almost all of the MEPs seem active in most of the relevant categories. Unsurprisingly the activity with the fewest tweets is that of MEPs inviting constituents to contribute and support causes which strengthen the brand. This verifies that the MEPs are hesitant to make contact and prefer to await from citizens to initiate interaction, retaining a responsive character. Alternatively, this may be related to their lack of available time which hampers their personal engagement in SMPs.

Finally, most of the MEPs claimed in their interviews that the provision of accountable information is a requirement to help constituents shape and formulate their views and opinions. If most of the information provided online were indeed coming from credible and verifiable sources, then one would argue that constituents can make an unbiased evaluation before shaping their views. However, as the content analysis indicates, the uploaded verifiable information accounts for about 25% of the accountability (AC) tweets. Meanwhile, the categories which refer to the opinionated non-objective information that the MEPs use to promote their personal views (Speeches, Statements, Links to traditional media etc.) account for about 40% of the accountability tweets. Consequently, the prevalence of opinionated material in the MEPs' accounts is not supportive of their efforts for greater accountability, even if the constituents had the enthusiasm to verify the directly provided information.

8.3.2 Overcoming limitations with future research

The thesis contributes to the body of literature by providing insight on the neglected topic of how the MEPs define and shape the potential for political participation in SMPs based on different perspectives of online political communication and how branding affects their style and method of representation. The clear focus of this research was on a particular sample of participants; MEPs from the crisis-inflicted states of Greece, Cyprus and Ireland. However, as the crisis inflicted most of the European South, there are more states like Portugal, Spain or Italy, which could have been researched. Methodological considerations, together with the language barrier and other logistical constraints, kept the MEPs from these countries out of the sample. Consequently, future research could comparatively approach these countries and particularly Spain, which is one of the big EU economies where the crisis infused the political scenery with unrest, social movements and political realignments similar to Greece.

Methodologically, the thesis used semi-structured interviews as the primary research method, because the research focus was to seek and reveal the insight of the MEPs and the expression of their inner thoughts and understandings. The analysis of social media content took the form of a support mechanism which facilitated the justification of MEP arguments and the determination of thematic parameters which influenced the direction of the research. The collection of SMP content receives two notable observations. The first is the anticipation that compared to Facebook, Twitter would not produce the same wealth of results for the Policy Discussion theme. This is because both the literature and the MEPs allowed only a slight margin for the argument that Twitter was a sufficient dialogue space designed and primarily used for extensive fruitful discussions. Although the choice of Twitter as a case study platform for the current study is explained in detail in the methodology chapter, in the future, it would be interesting to see the volume and quality of results produced if Facebook is chosen as the case study platform.

The timeframe used for the collection of tweets stretched from 21/9/2015 to 2/2/2016, and it was carefully chosen as a routine timeframe, i.e. a period with no electoral campaigning for all of the participating MEPs. The reason behind this decision was to

avoid any bias that would accompany the use of SMPs from the MEPs for electoral purposes. Although the scanning of the literature in chapter one and chapter two revealed studies which were focusing on campaigning periods, none of them took into account the parameter of the crisis landscape. Consequently, applying the existing study framework on crisis-inflicted states during electoral periods would open a new exciting option which would also allow examination of the party brand in parallel with the personal MEP brand.

Before expanding further on the influence of the party brand, we must first clarify that it was a strategic decision in this study to focus on the MEPs as political entities and not as party affiliates. As the MEPs are not conforming to partisan priorities as much as the national MPs, the role of the party of origin was deemed second-order and was not addressed in detail in this study. The SMPs give the MEPs a chance to follow a personalised approach in their interactions with the public outside partisan boundaries (some MEPs have already indicated the desire to become influential in the society regardless of their partisan identity). Eventually, this study offers (subchapter 8.4) a preliminary analysis which associates MEPs from specific party-groups with specific orientations and brands.

As some MEPs mentioned during the interviews (e.g. MEP2), there is no immediate way to evidence MEPs' contribution to EU decisions which have a direct effect on the constituents like with the national MPs. Evaluating the practical significance of MEP contribution requires a process of post-legislative analysis that is long-lasting and intersects with how the national governments apply the EU directives and policies. It would, however, be interesting if future research could determine whether MEPs' legislative activities adhere to the process of online committing that takes place in SMPs; whether constituents' views and preferences publically expressed online find their spot in the Committee discussions or even more in the official votes in the EP.

Finally, as seen in the previous subchapter (8.5), a topic which emerged during the semi-structured interviews and formulated the policy recommendation of the thesis was the establishment of an institutional platform that would facilitate discussions with the constituents with security and less noise. This is a topic that affects the allocation of

resources from the MEPs as well as the access of citizens from all over the EU to any of the MEPs, i.e. the opening of the public sphere. However, it should be investigated if MEPs' preference for official EP deliberative mechanisms, stems from the desire to institutionalise online discussions (taking into account partisan positions on the matter) or from the inability to privately administer discussions without official support. It is a topic that is worthy of further research and one that can test the honest intention of the EU to facilitate unmediated personalised interactions which can contribute to policy formation. Also, it would be interesting to see how the MEPs perceive the involvement of their parties in the process and how this affects individual branding strategies in relation to the party brand.

8.4 Linking accountability, policy discussion and branding

As analysed in chapter 5, transparency as a motivation entails extensive visibility of the MEPs' work, clarification of their role, provision of EP-related activities performed by the MEPs and information about the MEPs' interventions in the Committees and the Plenary. This is in the form of links to official EU statements, reports and speeches, articles and commentaries where the MEPs explain positions and justify actions. The importance is on evidenced, objective and verifiable information about the MEPs work and activities. As Hix (2008) explains, transparency is a good thing overall but has an adverse effect. On the one hand, full awareness about the European functions and policies mean that citizens get closer to the EU and abandon their ignorance and indifference. On the other hand, knowing in detail what the EU is all about, helps them understand or calculate whether they benefit from the policies in the long run. In other words, it also becomes transparent who wins and who loses from European integration (Hix, 2008:65). Having social media to facilitate unmediated interactions between constituents and the MEPs is, in principle, a gap-bridging and democratic action. However, even if there is increased awareness of the constituents, this can backfire and generate even more disagreement and disconnection. This is either because the 'version' of the EU that the representatives broadcast is by default negatively biased (e.g. Eurosceptic MEPs) or because of the 'calculations' the constituents do regarding the effect of the policies on their wellbeing. In a post-crisis landscape where the crisis

aftermath is still the central theme of the social narrative, none of the two cases sounds supportive for further online participation.

According to the traditional view (Pitkin, 1967), legitimation comes (as the interviewed MEPs stressed) with the authorisation to represent, which is provided to the MEPs with the election. This understanding explains the requirement of accountability in a promise-sanction framework which requires constituents to initiate public inquiries, receive the MEPs' responses and decide upon rewards or sanctions. In this view, which was modernised in the '00s, the choice of MEPs to either act as delegates or trustees determines the set of information they must provide online to persuade constituents that they acted in their best interest either by fulfilling their preferences or by making optimal judgements and successful choices. Almost all of the MEPs avoided linking social media accountability with the legitimation of their presence in Brussels. Legitimation and sense of duty received from most of the interviewed MEPs an ethical and indirect dimension. This legitimation becomes justified through more online exposure which entails information on the range of work the MEPs perform in the EP, working reports, proposed amendments, information on the topics they raise in the Committees, participation in policy formation, publishing of voting behaviour and party-group activities. Also, it often refers to the feedback provided as a response to constituents' questions about justifying specific actions. This legitimation comes from making people understand and acknowledge the MEPs' contribution, e.g. when the MEPs publish their voting behaviour online and allow constituents to follow-up this process and interact. However, the MEPs understand that having thousands of followers, keeping in touch with them and thinking that this legitimises their actions, choices and views should not be seen as adequate provision especially in a landscape of distrust. The interviews did not reveal an active pursuit of online interactions for legitimation purposes, so this is a result-of rather than a cause-for the use of SMPs.

Traditional arguments about the provision of top-to-bottom information (Arnstein, 1969) implied that when a power-relation exists, the powerholders often handle information in such a way that the receiver only collects what is in the transmitter's interest. As the constituents rely on the MEPs to receive detailed information about their activities in the EP, this implies that the MEPs would either provide as little

information as possible or use accountable information that justifies their activities and choices. This constitutes the verification of the provided information as a prerequisite for the formulation of an honest online relationship which enhances transparency and legitimation. One of the evidencing methodologies the MEPs use is to turn SMPs to repositories, work-diaries and visual records. This is mostly about storing and distributing content which verifies and evidences the MEP contributions. The content can be in the form of press releases, videos, statements, interviews, links from/to other social or mainstream media, Committee and Plenary speeches, commentaries, sound and video recordings, published articles, reports, statements and generally evidence that create a historical account of the MEP's presence, turning social media to accountable digital databases. Many MEPs like to consider the repository character of the SMPs an advantage in two ways. One is that they can access material used in the past to ensure that they remain consistent without deviating from previous commitments and the other is the capacity to use historical instances of their online behaviour as evidence against allegations (from opponents or constituents). In principle, both advantages sound rational and useful, but it is not clear how they can be practically applied. If an MEP has a limited presence and content production, then perhaps it may be feasible to manually search and spot specific posts, broadcasts or uploads from the past with some limited effort. However, if the MEP is very productive and has, e.g. more than 10000 tweets (like some of the interviewed MEPs), then the process of detecting past discourse requires deep digging (and assisting software) which might consume time and labour (associates), resources which the MEPs claimed that they do not have in abundance.

The use of SMPs as bi-directional channels is about the MEPs focusing on receiving rather than broadcasting information. To receive information from the constituents, the MEPs must first perform informative broadcasts about significant issues and developments, give links to resources, offer fact-based data about the policies, clarify legislation procedures, publish party positions and views and inform about what other colleagues do. The purpose is not just to provide awareness and disseminate knowledge relevant to their work but to empower and intrigue constituents to engage by providing alternative information or perspectives which can be helpful to their work in the EP. An interesting reference from Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2013) to Vitak (2011) deals with the

character of democratic participation. They claim that although with SMPs, the engagement and political activity have risen in quantity, the quality remains low and superficial. Except for the improvement of informational exchanges, the value generated by more intensive interaction is not transformed into democratic gains. In fact, although the citizens look more energetic by interacting more, in reality, they become lazy, believing that by tweeting a mere comment or asking a question, they fulfil their civic duty. This 'digital slacktivism'[23] is, in reality, part of an illusive democracy where people choose self-satisfying forms of interaction without producing a meaningful impact. The emergence of an illusive democracy is mentioned as a danger of an imbalanced SMP development. Expressing a view out in the virtual openness is not the same as constructing a substantial argument, and definitely, it is not a substitute for democracy (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). For this reason, numerous dispersed individualised interactions are met with scepticism by many MEPs who argue for a more centralised direction to avoid the fragmentation of the virtual sphere (see subchapter 8.5). Another element of that is the tendency of constituents to receive information from only a few specific social media sources believing that this is enough to create full awareness of the issues. The lack of relevant background is then revealed during online interactions, especially those related to policy discussions.

Retaining consistency is deemed as a vital feature and a strong motivation for the MEPs. In their answers, the MEPs stressed the importance of maintaining a steady behaviour, within a fluctuating scenery overwhelmed by decisions related to painful reforms and austerity. The MEPs mostly view consistency as a continuous process where content from traditional media or physical interactions is reproduced online. The MEPs accountability offerings can be the effort to verify through the social media actions and decisions already taken. This involves, e.g. speeches and interviews, EP work and activities, party positions or views already expressed live during events. One of the challenges for the MEPs in the landscape of crisis is to ensure that what is broadcasted online is consistent with what is transmitted in mainstream media or during live speeches and events. The MEPs understand how important it is to always be in a position to explain to the public how they reached a decision and SMPs are beneficial to clarify

[23] For details on this concept please see Howard et al. (2017) available at https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:1c1fa7d6-51fb-41fd-b8b8-b44cb6d493e3

positions promptly, avoiding claims and allegations of inconsistency. Overall it is about promoting with dedication a clear, distinct message which remains the same online and offline. However, the importance of consistency is rather individualistic and not collective. It is not the welfare of constituents, which is affected by this feature, so this accountability-oriented incentive is masking the more deep-seated anxiety of the MEPs to protect and retain their public image as trustworthy representatives. Retaining a stable political voice in a fluctuating and uncertain environment is not only a sign of reliability but also an attractive feature for the political profile. The presence in the EP, the speeches, the interviews, the other broadcasting activities and the social media posts, are all components that form a general impression to the public; therefore they shape the brand. A method to pursue consistency is by remaining loyal to previous commitments expressed offline or online.

Committing online is about two expressions of accountability; one when the MEPs inform proactively about their intention to behave or vote in a specific way sometime in the future and another when they declare their intention for future action as a response to constituents' requests. In the first case, it is the MEPs who deliver their intention and embark on a critical discussion about the reasons for doing so. This is mostly used by the MEPs when their choices deviate from the party view or from what is generally thought to be the national interest (as constituents interpret this). The responsive committing requires constituents to approach the MEPs first and request a particular MEP behaviour on a topic. Then the MEPs usually respond with a declaration which may be accompanied by a justification or a link to justifying sources (e.g. partisan repositories) or by simply declaring the rationale of their judgement. These claims for commitment have always existed in the private sphere and were expressed usually via emails. Now people find social media more convenient than using emails, and this is opening the commitment to a broader audience. This, in reality, is a public claim from constituents to be represented the way they see fit, and it results in the application of public pressure to the MEPs, to declare in advance their political stance. The easiest way to defend against or bypass the claims is for MEPs to put forward partisan decisions and arguments as justification to their decisions. However, the constituents may ask from the MEPs to rebel against their party-group and vote according to their conscience, which is often related to people's perception of the MEP's political brand (ideology and consistent past

behaviour). Although the fulfilment of online commitments expressed in the public platforms is a contemporary component of accountability and a measurement of credibility and consistency, committing online can also be perceived as a form of preserving the brand. In fact, some MEPs openly admitted that their motivation was entirely based upon the improvement of their brand.

The MEPs might often exploit the complementarity of SMPs with other methods. This becomes evident when the MEPs use a combination of social/mainstream media and physical presence. The best example is the live online broadcasting of gatherings and events that physically take place in the constituency and have a non-campaigning character (e.g. live discussions with NGOs, trade unions, public speeches in Universities etc.) and the reproduction of interviews, articles and commentaries that can be found in traditional media. Social media is the contemporary method to 'get the message across' i.e. that the MEPs are doing the job they were elected for. The SMPs should be seen as only one of the available methods to fulfil this duty. SMPs can be part of an extensive scheme, which involves face to face tours and visits around the constituency, to ensure that all constituents (not only supporters), will have the opportunity to learn about the MEP's work. The complementarity of the methods is the vehicle for self-improvement processes which emerge from the feedback or the critique of the constituents stimulating actions from the MEPs at a later time. This feedback can be spontaneously provided or directly requested or even indirectly provoked when the MEPs publish self-assessment information or summative reports of their activity. The MEPs see the provision of review information to the constituents and the collection of their feedback in the form of a general assessment or evaluation as a form of self-reflection. The MEPs may also ask for the expectations of the constituents for future behaviour or emphasise on their behaviour during 'big' EU events or for crucial EU policies. The motivation for self-reflection and internal accountability procedures has emerged after the MEPs' online exposure. Therefore it is result-oriented, expressing the tendency of some MEPs to use SMPs in a more 'professional' way, anticipating some form of future reward.

The forward-looking view of accountability was stirred by Mansbridge's (2003) introduction of new representation perspectives. By, driving accountability away from

the sanction-reward model, Mansbridge proposed anticipatory, gyroscopic and surrogate representation. In anticipatory representation, accountability in retrospect (activities the MEPs performed in the past) is no longer necessary and becomes forward-looking as an effort to adhere to constituents' preferences, which can be either collected in real-time or adjusted during a process of informed communication as described in the previous paragraphs. In gyroscopic representation, the interaction becomes more engaging, replacing traditional accountability. The crucial task for constituents is to predict MEPs' behaviour based on their personality traits or their broadcasted brand. In this respect, the transparency of the broadcasted information is crucial for the selection of the right candidates by the constituents. In surrogate representation, traditional accountability is non-existent because the selected MEPs will be voted from other constituencies to promote policies which will hopefully affect all of the constituents. The attraction to these MEPs and the consequent online support is based upon the descriptive features they promote online. Descriptive representation decreases the demand for accountability as it is based on the possession of personal features which provide reassurance and security. The support in the form of retweets, public praise etc. is promotional and influential for the voters in the MEPs' constituency.

The issue of bridging the gap with disassociated citizens is one of the most interesting because it relates to the post-crisis landscape, for which the MEPs are not responsible. The researched MEPs admit that the constituents have little if any knowledge of what the MEPs do. In fact, there is considerable ignorance about even the most basic functions of the EU. Social media were unanimously considered as an adhesive substance, helping MEPs to reach out to the constituents, by briefing them about MEP activities in the European Parliament. Nevertheless, the consensus of the researched MEPs is that increased online participation of the public is not enough on its own to bring citizens closer to their representatives, especially in the crisis-inflicted states. The interviewed MEPs argued that the social and political environment influences the tendency of citizens to upload non-productive posts of radical sentiment that surpass the boundaries of civility. Responding to these comments can become an endless process of debating with permanently displeased voices, stereotype views and populist narratives. The scepticism about the capacity of online interactions to contribute to the understanding of the constituents about the role of the MEPs, the procedures of

decision making and the institutional view of the EU, deeply affected MEPs' motivation. According to their calculations, well-intended feedback accounts for less than 10% of the total interactions. Many MEPs translate the online landscape as being 'a damaged good' overwhelmed by noise and trolling.

However, as seen in the findings in chapter 6, the majority of the interviewed MEPs declare theoretical support and faith in the usefulness of deeper participation of the public in the design of policies. Most of them support the establishment of a framework of online consultation, where constituents will contribute their ideas, proposals and suggestions. As reality proves, the results of such efforts are so far contradictory, making the initial motivation look like a utopia. During the economic crisis, political dialogue has rapidly turned from the exchange of positions and suggestions to the exchange of brutal quotes. This was a result of the fragmentation in the society which is powerful enough to establish a system of vertical confrontation, which reduces the opportunities for constructive communication. The confrontation has often been grotesque, and this exposes the degree of the devaluation of politicians in the consciousness of the citizens. During the interviews, participating MEPs claimed that they had encountered minimal interactional opportunities with constituents. Their behaviour was predominantly broadcasting or slightly commentary, and they did not instigate interactional communication. In rare cases, they might have responded to sporadic comments or polite sentiment expressions. There is an apparent lack of trust in the capacity of the constituents to produce sensible suggestions due to their misinformation.

Many MEPs were overwhelmed by the degree of negativity online, making a connection between the rage expressed by voters inflicted by the crisis, the national political culture and the widespread overall pessimism in the society. Some MEPs associated the rapidity of communication and the desire to anonymously express sentiment online, as a justification for poor dialogues. For most of the MEPs, it is the current social and political climate of unrest that defines the nature of political communication, with such minimal opportunities for constructive dialogue. All MEPs agreed that the portion of quality interactions is very small, roughly estimated to no more than 5-10% of all online interactions. This toxic combination was a disincentive for any further online involvement with constituents. The only remaining motivation to engage relates to

some issue-campaigning initiatives and future electoral gains; not to the desire for policy discussion. Believing that only a minimal portion of the electorate could offer a base for fruitful dialogue, was not tempting enough to pursue any deliberative interaction.

For several MEPs, the participation in online discussions with the public is seen as a way to grasp the direction of the public opinion and keep track of constituents' thinking. Further to this, there is widespread interest among the MEPs to surpass their representational boundaries and become capable of guiding public views as influential opinion leaders. The interviewed MEPs revealed that from time to time, there is online interaction with citizens from outside the constituency or even from other states. The international interactions in SMPs become interesting when the MEPs start to view them as something beyond public relations. Some MEPs feel that although these new social media contacts offer no electoral benefits, it is within their overall responsibility to inform the citizens of Europe about the policies that shape the common European future. The primary purpose is for the MEPs to carry the integration message to all EU citizens and influence them accordingly through a combination of fact-based information and light educating about the 'art of feasibility' which is much different from populist claims. Unfortunately, the lack of a unified EU public sphere, the language barrier and the prioritisation of the national (voting) audience constrain the 'opening' of the SMPs to mere informational broadcasts. All MEPs declared their openness and willingness to energetically participate in online deliberative processes, as long as security and administrative features were in place. In fact, they were willing to accept and use an institutionally designed platform if the EP promoted such an initiative. Further research should try to determine if this preference stems from the desire to institutionalise online deliberation (taking into account partisan positions on the matter) or the inability of the MEPs to administer online discussions without official support privately.

Interacting with constituents was not a priority for most of the participants; it was instead an inevitable consequence of their engagement. In the cases where the MEPs were seeking to interact with citizens, this was considered as a preparatory stage for their actual face-to-face campaigning tour at the constituency. This was due to the belief that although citizens who interact online are a growing group in the electorate, the

majority of the MEPs still prefer and understand old-school political approaches. A significant finding is that all MEPs elected in a unified national constituency felt the need to campaign extensively in person as they 'needed to shake hands'. To be re-elected in a national constituency requires to be widely recognised as a political figure. Social media modernised their profile as politicians who understand and use technology. Twitter nevertheless was deemed as having a limited audience, and the need to address larger portions of the electorate for publicity purposes suggests, using other platforms like Facebook and YouTube in a complementary way.

Such strategic decisions are in line with the industrial operation of the SMPs, which entails a systematic approach of associates, content and method. Regardless of the chosen layer or intensity that the MEPs prefer, the choice includes serious time management, focused targeting of constituents with distributed material, allocation of tasks to associate and delegation of responsibility to act according to a central strategy, the use of parallel broadcasting centres (in social or mainstream media), proactive operation, collaborations with experts and journalists and most of all an uninterrupted focus on political developments. The purpose is twofold; either to build a narrative of detailed attendance and expertise which can infuse electoral rewards or to designate a brand of seriousness and modernity combined with a capacity to penetrate audiences and influence preferences. In both cases, the vehicle is the SMP, and this constitutes the industrial operation as a prevalent brand-enhancing mechanism. It so happens that the researched MEPs who use an industrial approach already have an established brand and are cautious with the impressions they want to create publically. For this reason, their attachment to descriptive features is not detailed or based on mainstream events and activities. The industrial operation ensures that the conformity with work recognisability is accessible through the SMPs via detailed evidence, so the focus is on sustaining a general impression based on the big picture of representation with automated inferences to character, personality and principles.

8.5 Motivational categories, modes of online behaviour and MEP classifications

Accountability, policy discussion and branding have been researched in this study as pillars of political participation which were influenced (or sometimes defined) by the various expressions of the crisis in the landscape of social media. Within this landscape the twenty four MEPs from the three researched states allowed the features of their personality to emerge and flourish, choosing activities, initiatives, priorities and statements which were demonstrated online through a variety of behaviours. The analysis of findings made clear that there are three basic expressions of the MEPs' nature as representatives, characterising them as Idealists, Pragmatists or Cynical. In all of these three orientations, the MEPs understand, realise and take for granted the existing SMP environment with its parameters, difficulties and challenges. What differentiates them is first their appreciation for the constituents and second their capacity to endure and surpass the deficiencies of the virtual landscape.

In the following table (Table 8.5a), the 24 MEPs are allocated according to their orientation.

MEPs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	TOTALS
Idealists			√					√			√		3
Pragmatists	√			√	√		√			√			5
Cynical		√				√			√			√	4
MEPs	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	TOTALS
Idealists					√		√						2
Pragmatists	√	√	√	√		√			√		√	√	8
Cynical								√		√			2
Idealists	5	3, 8, 11, 17, 19											
Pragmatists	13	1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24											
Cynical	6	2, 6, 9, 12, 20, 22											

Table 8.5a Allocation of MEPs in orientation groups

The Cynical are MEPs who see social media as tools or mechanisms which offer benefits from the exploitation of their communicational features and always under the scope of personal interest. Social media are all about enhancing the political profile and strengthening an already established brand. Dialogue, policy discussion and mutual

exchanges with constituents are of no real value, and there is no need to increase their efforts to reach out to citizens unless this contributes to a series of anticipated rewards. The Cynical are mostly broadcasting content related to their work or views not for the shake of their constituents but for their own personal promotion. They are mostly users with an established brand who use social media as a supportive mechanism and avoid further engagement with the public.

The Pragmatists are MEPs who acknowledge the importance of social media in contemporary representation, using them mostly as tools to connect with citizens and offer accountability elements. They recognise the limitations and dangers of the existing social media landscape and reserve their enthusiasm to involve more in the future if certain circumstances exist and their resources are adequate. They use the SMPs trying to balance their representation duties with the enhancement of their brand. They embark in interactions whenever it is required, but they avoid open online discussions and prefer to redirect these opportunities to more private means of communication like emails, messages and traditional methods of face-to-face contact.

The Idealists are MEPs who crave for citizen interaction, defy the noise and the malicious online attacks and declare willing to discover, associate and cooperate with the citizens who have something to contribute in mutual decision making and policy formation regardless of the cost in personal resources. It is within their mentality and culture to explore citizen views, public opinion and feedback in the form of ideas and proposals and they view social media as forums for the generation of dialogue. They recognise the existing limitations but are highly optimistic that things will improve in the future. As a result, they are willing to allocate extra resources (time, funds, and people) in order to grasp public opinion and use it in policy-making.

There are also three interactional modes observed online (broadcast, interact, discuss) which relate to the three MEP types (Cynical, Pragmatists, Idealists) and associate to the main three functions examined in the thesis (accountability, policy discussion and branding). In the following figure (Figure 8.5b), the three MEP types are associated with modes of interaction in relation to the three functions.

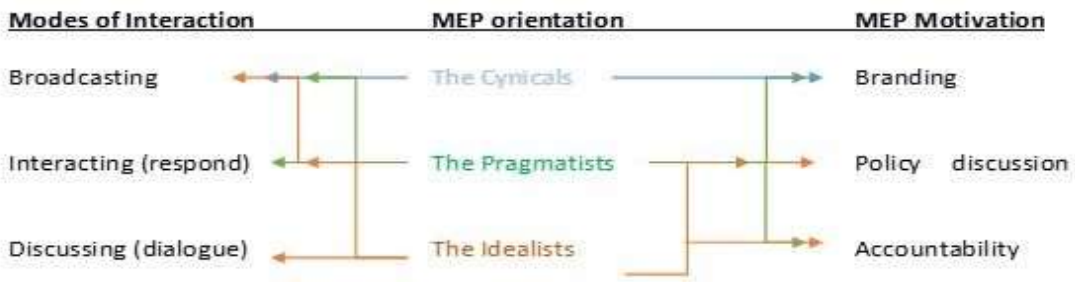

Figure 8.5b Interactional modes by orientation

The landscape of social media is more or less consolidated and embedded in the MEPs' way of thinking, and they believe that they have to take it for granted without anticipating any significant improvements. For example, the Pragmatists consider themselves to be users of the SMPs more than developers of SMP content, and they accept the imposed limitations when prioritising their activities and responses; they embrace all three functions but avoid public discussions. In contrast, the Idealists are more interested in producing new content by creating instances of engagement which can generate discussions and debates. They embrace all three modes of interaction with an emphasis on discussions and avoid activities that are purely promotional for their brand. The Cynical are mostly broadcasters who focus on promotional activities to strengthen the brand. Their communicational exchanges are brief and targeted to provide feedback only if asked by citizens.

The following table 8.5c is helpful to summarise the features and characteristics of the three orientations and their interactional tendencies.

	Idealist	Pragmatist	Cynical
Approach of SMPs	Optimistic	Sceptical	Indifferent
Use of SMPs	Engagement and discussion tools	Working tools	Promotional tools
Accountability	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Policy Discussion	Strong	Weak	Weak
Branding	Weak	Moderate	Strong
Online Tendency	Discuss / Interact	Interact / Broadcast	Broadcast
Aim	Mutual decision making	Connectivity and visibility	Publicity rewards
MEP Allocation	3, 8, 11, 17, 19	1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24	2, 6, 9, 12, 20, 22
Party Affiliation	GUE/NGL=4, S&D=1	EPP=6, GUE/NGL=4, S&D=3	EPP=4, S&D=1, GUE/NGL=1

Table 8.5c MEP orientations and interactional tendencies

If we focus on partisan affiliation in the previous table, we instantly notice that the Idealists are MEPs from the centre-left and left spectrum and the Cynical are mostly from the centre-right[24]. The synthesis of the Pragmatists verifies that this is a mixed group which collects MEPs from various party-groups, implying that the criteria used by these MEPs are mostly personal in nature; perhaps even opportunistic.

It would also be wise to expand our understanding by combining the previous information with the findings which are related to the prevailing brands that the MEPs adopt in their online endeavours. In the following table (Table 8.5d), the two prevailing brands are broken down to their components, and the researched MEPs are allocated to one or the other based upon the collected data.

	European Expert	One of Us
Feature	Expert knowledge and inside information	Approachability and 'normal' everyday behaviour
Priorities	Realistic expectations and feasibility (what is best for the EU)	Honesty, integrity and social concern (what is best for citizens)
Activity	'Educating' citizens' views	Sharing knowledge and accountable information
Role	Decision making	Decision sharing
Desire	Retain own power position	Empower citizens
MEP Allocation	1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20, 23 (TOTAL=10)	3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 24 (TOTAL=14)
Party Affiliation	EPP=9, GUE/NGL=1	GUE/NGL=8, S&D=5, EPP=1

Table 8.5d The prevailing brands among the researched MEPs

There seems to be a balance in the number of MEPs applying each one of the brands. Also, there is a clear partisan affiliation as all EPP MEPs adopt the European Expert brand while all S&D MEPs adopted the One-of-us brand. The majority of GUE/NGL MEPs adopt the One-of-us brand, but there is one MEP who applies the European Expert brand. This is a distinct case as this GUE/NGL MEP is not a keen adopter of the full brand. He/she is an experienced MEP with an established political image who admits having the capacity to access privileged information. Although his/her previous experience justifies the identity of an expert, there is no attempt to use it to educate citizens' views; he/she

[24] The two Cynical cases from S&D and GUE/NGL are distinct cases of MEPs who have no real interest in social media and they simply maintain their accounts to '*remain within the internet trend*' as they claimed.

merely acknowledges the importance of expert knowledge to improve citizens' understanding of EU decisions. Similarly, there is one EPP MEP who chooses to identify as One-of-Us, and this is also a unique case as this MEP considers more important his/her established professional brand which goes back many years with international accreditation in the field of human rights. Consequently, the need to approach people for the shake of humanitarianism surpasses any desire to use the established expertise online. With all these in mind (including the two distinct exceptions) there seems to be an ideological underpinning in the two brands which generates a tendency among the MEPs to choose accordingly, making right-ish MEPs to adopt the European Expert brand and left-ish MEPs to be attracted by the One-of-Us brand. To illustrate this, I quote a GUE/NGL MEP's claim: '*As a left MEP my life needs to be in line with my ideas. I walk down the streets and associate with everyone because I have a mortgage, kids in a public school and I share the same problems with other people. How can I sell them expertise and superiority*?'

If we now try to combine the prevailing brands with the MEP orientations from Table 8.5c, we get the following table 8.5e:

↓Orientation/Brand→	**European Expert**	**One-of-Us**
Idealists		3, 8, 11, 17, 19 (4 GUE/NGL + 1 S&D)
Pragmatists	1, 5, 10, 14, 18, 23 (6 EPP)	4, 7, 13, 15, 16, 21, 24 (4 GUE/NGL + 3 S&D)
Cynical	2, 6, 12, 20 (3 EPP 1 + GUE/NGL)	9, 22 (1 S&D + 1 EPP)

Table 8.5e Combination of Brands and MEP Orientations

From this table, it is now obvious that the Idealists identify completely with the One-of-Us brand while the Cynical are more keen to adopt the European Expert brand. The Pragmatists represent the middle ground, a majority of MEPs whose online behaviour fluctuates according to their evaluation of the landscape as they are looking for an ideal mix of representation and branding. The Idealist and the Pragmatist One-of-Us come from party-groups of the left/centre-left orientation while the full list of Pragmatist Experts and the majority of the Cynical Experts come from the centre-right. These facts indicate once more that the left-centre and left representatives are strategically keen to

embrace everyday practices, relaxed approaches and informal online interactions of intimacy aiming at bringing citizens within the circle of EU decision making, while the centre-right are more interested into maintaining the status quo by convincing that they are doing a good job which should be appreciated and rewarded. It is unclear though whether there is an underlying populist intention behind the tendency of leftish MEPs to support citizen engagement online. Especially as in both Ireland and Greece the GUE/NGL-related parties have been accused of populist rhetoric with the intention to provoke social unrest during the crisis period (Syriza party in Greece actually won the 2015 election due to populist claims and statements that were never delivered).

Moving on to the analysis of the external and internal parameters which the MEPs believe that affect online behaviour, it emerges that some of the internal parameters receive a more generous reference from the MEPs. The synthesis and contribution of the participants and especially the amount of noise and trolling that exist online, are parameters which the MEPs use to justify their lack of enthusiasm to engage with the constituents. The synthesis of the social media audience is considered a parameter of the internal landscape, but in reality, it is also an external parameter as the people who engage in social media are also the people who have been inflicted by the crisis. Although the MEPs do not consider the social media audience as representing the whole of the society, it is still a societal group with considerable size and infinite openness to location, age, profession, financial status, etc. Combined with the explicit design features of the two major platforms and the limited capacity of the MEPs to allocate resources, these parameters prevail as incentives or disincentives to behave in a specific way (interact or broadcast) or to pursue engagements of a specific type (for accountability, discussion or branding purposes).

The MEPs may have specific motivations and expectations when they use SMPs dictating the type and volume of interactivity they pursue online. Their chosen mix of broadcasting and interacting behaviour depends on whether they intend to offer accountable information or engage in policy discussions or to simply promote their brand. The manner in which the MEPs feel the need to respond to constituents' approaches is often dictated by the pressure exercised by the public character of SMPs. The pressure of publicity transforms an ethical duty into a communicational formality

and eventually into a feature of brand-building as the MEPs have to look like caring and responsive representatives whenever approached by their audience. At the same time, these predefined motivations can be justified, refuted, enhanced or diminished by the feedback they receive from the public in relation to these intentions. In other words, it is the online experience which may also be shaping the MEPs' perception as to what the SMPs can offer to them. Constituents' participation, for example, can be a one-off expression of positive or negative sentiment or an extended round of policy views, and this can disappoint or intrigue the MEPs to further engage in SMPs. One of the core arguments of many researched MEPs was that although they remain open, accessible, and available online and eager to debate, the constituents avoid to engage or prefer to interact for superficial reasons. Consequently, the lack of engagement becomes an argument for the MEPs to not engage.

8.6 Policy recommendation: An institutional platform for political participation

Almost all of the participating MEPs linked the existence and use of SMPs, to an increased engagement of the public into processes of democratic participation. After reviewing the findings in chapter 5, there are some MEPs (1, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 18 & 23) who were particularly warm with the idea that SMPs improve communication and bridge the gap between the constituents and the representatives. This character of directedness is helpful for people who feel excluded from the political life and an incentive to reach out (MEP8). However, the directedness of SMP communication does not guarantee that EU citizens will eventually express their views for the position, role or contribution of the MEPs (MEPs 1 &12). Some MEPs (10 & 5) claimed to work hard with their associates to connect online with constituents who feel neglected, by bringing their work and activities to their virtual doorstep, thinking that online interaction is by default, more accessible than physical engagement. This is because there is an increasing number of people who due to the social changes imposed by the crisis, reject instances of personal physical contact with the politicians (MEP18). Thus, the SMPs replaced face-to-face communication and contributed to maintaining contact with citizens who became disillusioned and frustrated with contemporary politics and would otherwise be politically invisible. In line with this argument, the MEPs have been

optimistic about 'discovering' and resurfacing more citizens in the political arena even though there are still too many who remain distant observers (MEP11).

Some MEPs insisted that SMPs generate new political venues and directions, by bringing EU citizens to the forefront of political developments and by giving them the necessary information to formulate and express views and positions on the spot (MEP14). In fact, between the alternatives of an indifferent non-engaging citizen and an opinionated but criticising citizen, the MEPs seem to prefer the second. '*No MEP likes confrontation and conflict online, but I would prefer the constituents to be lively and engaging even by expressing opposing views, rather than having indifferent citizens who do not bother to form an opinion in the first place*' MEP11 claimed. But how can these views form online? It seems that the MEPs agree that substantive online presence first requires the demonstration of fact-based objectivity. It has been a common view that although accusations, problems, hardships and mistakes associated with providing information online exist, overall, the SMPs have benefited transparency. When the MEPs provide explanatory feedback about their legislative activities, the potential for constituents to understand the EU policies becomes clearer (MEP23). As a result, the platforms can help constituents to become more acquainted with the MEPs' work while constituents' appraisal can become accessible to the MEPs. This alone is viewed by most MEPs as a cord which attaches national citizens to the EU core.

But are the existing SMPs capable of resolving the problem of disassociation? There have been many negative views on that from the MEPs (3, 6, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17, 19, 20 and 21). Most of them disagree with the idea that increased accountability in the SMPs can bridge the observed distance on its own. They blame the lack of an appropriate framework for citizen participation and think that the EP as an institution has the responsibility to create new procedures to approach the European citizens, especially since the European Citizen's Initiative has not been up to the task. The disassociation is the result of the intentional abstention of the EU citizens. '*We need new institutional processes of participation, not just mediums or tools of communication like the SMPs*' MEP3 insisted. Another argument suggests that policies are designed behind closed doors without taking into account the citizens' views, and this is eventually affecting citizens' trust towards the EU (MEP17). As a result, SMPs can help to some extent but

no more therapeutically than by improving the communicational gap with the MEPs; SMPs cannot produce the required level of trust. Some MEPs (MEPs 9 & 13) have been categorical that the role of the SMPs is limited to informing citizens about MEP activities or EU developments. The relevant broadcasts partially serve the need for accountability by delivering information, initiatives, actions, questions, and work in the Committees. '*The provision of accountability information in SMPs, cannot eliminate the democratic deficits of the European institutions because social media interaction has a temporary character, which does not create permanent results of generic reconnection*' MEP9 exclaimed. As a result, although traces of transparency and accountability can be found online, substantive policy discussions are very scarce. There is scepticism as to how many constituents take the time to attend policy discussions online.

Some MEPs think that this is because even though citizens have the option to follow the broadcasted MEPs' activities, the current state of affairs in the economy and the society, makes them have little if any appreciation about what the MEPs suggest or propose. For example, in MEP16's experience, '*online political participation is limited to receiving a sense of political developments. This is not helping citizens to formulate new objective views; it only allows them to verify established views and predetermined impressions which are shaped by the traditional media*'. Furthermore, although the disassociation is an issue that all member-states experience in various modes and intensities, the problem got enlarged in the states which were inflicted by the crisis. Because of the crisis, states like Greece, Ireland and Cyprus have not done much on a national level to exploit the benefits of the internet and strengthen the relationship between citizens and representatives. On the other hand, the EU, as a whole, has not actively pursued a coordinated and centrally administered approach regarding online participation (MEP7).

According to the MEPs' experience, the EU is not yet succeeding in providing accountable information that helps citizens formulate objective opinions about EU affairs and policies. This is leaving them vulnerable against the populist rhetoric, which makes SMPs unable to confront Euroscepticism. The amounts of populism and overwhelming vulgarity that exist in SMPs because of the lack of a regulatory framework, force the participants (politicians and citizens) to apply excessive filtering and composure (MEP21). With regard to bridging the gap between disassociated citizens

and politicians, the MEPs think that this argument is currently valid only for those who are already active in which case '*if the actively engaged citizens are a small portion of the electorate, then eventually you are bridging a gap with those who are already standing on the bridge!*' (MEPs 6 & 19). It is an obligation of the EU to use all existing methods to involve citizens in the process of decision making as this is foremost a democratic act in line with the mandate of some of its institutions like the EP (MEP20).

Considering findings from chapter 6, we should keep in mind that MEPs highlighted the absence of appropriate institutional routes (partisan or non-partisan) for the promotion of ideas and proposals that stem from individualised online discussions. The majority of the MEPs in the researched sample declared their willingness to continue their online participation upon the condition that the virtual sphere could be in some way shielded from the voices of extremity and the provocative noise, which they consider to be elements that jeopardise the stability of a participative environment. Most of them agreed that there could be no genuine dialogue online unless there is a set of rules and formal conditions to allow interactions in a more organised manner. MEP3, for example, would favour structured approaches or dedicated platforms where the participants would express their views freely, without the malicious confrontation of trolls. Many other MEPs claimed that the shielding of the dialogue would require the introduction of filters and security checks which the contemporary private SMPs like Facebook and Twitter may not be willing to introduce. For example, the SMPs could introduce keyword filters in relation to the discussion topics to avoid trolling. However, as some MEPs suggested, in practice, using filters associated with keywords may lead to the exclusion of specific portions of the electorate either left-wing or right-wing (MEP14). This is a delicate point of consideration and would bring forward issues of trust.

As a result, many MEPs encourage or propose the initiation of institutional arrangements for the formal facilitation of policy discussion in a way that would filter-out the intentionally unproductive voices. The preference for structured platforms and mediums '*with rules and procedures'* implies that online interactions should move from the established public SMPs to a new institutional discussion mechanism which would be EP related. Taking into account the findings in this study, an institutional EP platform would be ideal to position the interest of the whole electorate of Europe in a more

extensive interactional framework. It would be instrumental if the public sphere could open towards issues that attract the interest of international audiences because the big issues are most of the time common for all EU citizens like, e.g. climate change, immigration etc. People from other states would learn what the MEPs have to say, and MEPs would learn how other EU nationals think. It would open new horizons and give a broader perspective of the issues that affect all EU citizens. Eventually, the MEPs from the researched sample formulated three sub-groups: those who enthusiastically support the establishment of an institutional platform, those who agree in principle but need reassurances about the success of the initiative and those who are sceptical about it. The first two groups (representing 70% of the sample) are forming what could be called a supporting base for the idea of the institutional facilitation of online discussions. Among them, there is a small number of MEPs who would like to exploit their partisan affiliation in the discussion process.

The enthusiastic MEPs (1, 3, 5, 6, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18 & 21) demonstrate a great deal of encouragement towards overcoming the discussion obstacles found in the existing SMPs. Their main arguments for an institutional platform relates to a/ the excessive amount of noise and trolling that the MEPs receive in SMPs, and b/ the willingness to participate in a virtual process that would bring all European citizens and the MEPs together under the same framework of communication. Some MEPs (15 & 17) would gladly participate in discussions initiated from all corners of the EU as long as there was a platform that would promote unmediated interactions, ensuring that citizens' message can reach the MEPs without malicious distortion. If the MEPs are facilitated to respond to citizens' approaches with genuine verifiable data, then the outcome of this engagement would be productive. That is why these MEPs favour the creation of an EP platform which would safeguard a serious and rational discussion of the issues away from the noise of the trolls. Such a platform would eventually increase intimacy and bridge the gaps between the MEPs and citizens in a more substantial way than SMPs. One basic condition is, of course, that citizens' critique is not intentionally or by mistake filtered out. MEP3 is strongly supportive of an institutional platform dedicated to policy dialogue which would introduce thematic criteria but stresses the point that permission rights, management and control of the discussion conditions should not hamper the

openness of the platform. Otherwise, the necessary discussion depth will never be reached, and mutual decision making will not be possible.

With regard to the second argument, the potential of an institutional platform would give to citizens of different EU nationalities the chance to communicate with all the MEPs and formulate the basis of EU policy. The character of these policies is pan-European and all EU citizens, from bigger or smaller states, should have the right to address online those who represent them (MEP11). The pan-European character of a discussion forum where citizens from any EU country would be able to address all the MEPs cannot be disputed. An EP platform would encourage citizens to address MEPs based on their thematic involvement (Committee) or expertise and in relation to country or constituency affiliation. For some MEPs the fact that citizens from other EU states rarely if ever approach them in SMPs is not because of the language barrier (most of them often use English when posting); the lack of trust and the lack of available institutional arrangements are valid reasons. To further stress the link between accountability and policy discussion with the gap-bridging potential, MEP14 adds that an open and accessible to all EU citizens EP platform would justify that taxpayers' money is used for the benefit of the many. For transparency reasons, the people of Europe deserve to know where their money goes and how the decisions are taken.

Finally, from the point of view of convenience, the MEPs think that 'EU *citizens prefer methods of direct electronic communication and an institutional platform facilitating secure direct interaction would be welcomed*' (MEP5). The MEPs who generally favour ICT developments support initiatives in this direction and are willing to contribute if needed for the creation and maintenance of an institutional platform (MEP18). This is because, in the long run, an EP-administered platform would help the MEPs to capture genuine contributions from honestly interested open-minded constituents without having to waste their own scarce resources to maintaining multiple SMP profiles (MEP6). As many of the topics and arguments between some of the EP groups are often the same, this institutional platform could be tested at the party-group level first. MEP17 and MEP3 think that relevant experience exists in the national parties where online forums dedicated to discussions with supporters are already in use.

The group of MEPs who are in principle positive with the idea of an institutional platform but require reassurances about the practical benefits of the initiative (2, 7, 8, 19, 20 & 24) find the concept to be exciting and would be willing to engage, but they are somewhat sceptical about the quality of the contributions that would be generated by citizens of the crisis-inflicted states. '*It is not the platforms that have the problem; whether institutional or not, it is the constituents who lack the capacity or knowledge to formulate proposals of adding value*' (MEPs 7 & 20). MEP19, for example, reminded the problems with the European Citizen Initiative (ECI) which is the equivalent to an institutional platform for policy proposals. ECI has not worked as expected; therefore, to connect ECI to the virtual domain or to create a new ECI-like online procedure, is not bound to produce improved results. An electronic institutional platform could be useful for Europeans who want to engage, but their enthusiasm should not be met with indifference from the Commission. '*The opening of the public sphere online would be beneficial, and the citizens would embrace such a platform favourably. However, this can only work if the EU is honestly willing to adopt at least some of the citizens' suggestion*s' (MEP8). The institutional platform requires the EP to participate more in the decision making in the EU. If so, then a platform with inclusive structures would benefit public dialogue and would create a better understanding of the issues.

In contrast to the encouragingly positive tendency of the first two groups, there are a few sceptical MEPs (9, 10, 12, 16, 22 & 23) who question the value that can be produced by an EP platform. Some MEPs base this assumption on a previous negative experience. MEP12, for example, informs that 'e-*processes for online discussion were introduced from the national party, but the tool was never used even by the party followers because they did not genuinely care'*. Similarly, after taking part in discussions about the refugee crisis in 2015, MEP9 believes that spontaneous and individualistic interactions cannot be successful. Benefits can only be produced when policy discussion is highly focused involving organised audiences with a predefined structure and a designated interest like NGOs and civil society groups. Another argument against the institutional platform comes from the MEPs who believe that establishing new structures will further fragment the communication with the citizens. The more the number of communicational mediums increases, the more the constituents get disoriented and unwilling to embark into more detailed interactions. It is not the increase of networked solutions that will

improve political dialogue or the quality of interactions (MEPs 10 & 16). Moreover, the public is more attracted to independent mediums like the existing SMPs and is generally reluctant to use 'institutional' solutions. Facebook can accommodate live streaming of MEP initiatives, and the EP Media Service covers the EP events; thus, the capacities of existing media are adequate (MEP23). Finally, MEP22 is not convinced that the EP has any desire to take into account citizens' contributions; therefore, it has no interest in the creation of an institutional platform for online discussions.

Considering the previous findings and the different standpoints expressed by the MEPs, the thesis recommends that an institutional e-participation platform which facilitates accountable auditing and policy discussion at the pan-European level would release valuable MEP resources while safeguarding the pillars of representation from promotional disturbances. These resources would then be available to be relocated from social media management to the legislative process, improving the quality of representation in the EP.

8.7 Concluding remarks: A framework for e-participation

From the evaluation of the findings, it becomes apparent that the more meaningful online engagements like the substantive policy discussions are hampered by negative sentiment expression. The current online environment is viewed by the majority of the MEPs as toxic; a 'ruined good' overwhelmed by 'trolling'. Because of this impression, there is increased MEP scepticism over the contribution of online interactions to the improvement of the political landscape and the reduction of the democratic gaps, and this profoundly affects their motivation to engage online. Consequently, the MEPs' motivation is realigned towards promotional or branding priorities affecting the quantity, duration and quality of online interactions. Even so, the MEPs cannot dispute the transactional benefits of SMPs, which turn them from tenants of controlled media air-time to landlords of a unique space of unlimited expression.

Currently, what prevails online is a toxic combination which discourages online exchanges. It reflects citizens' rage for the aftermath of the crisis, the general political

unrest in the societies of the crisis-inflicted states and the widespread overwhelming negativity of the populist rhetoric. This toxic combination forces people to anonymously express sentiment and avoid constructive dialogue. As a result, policy contributions are minimal and distorted. This is designated by the small number of Idealist MEPs who dedicate themselves to engage in productive discussions with the public. Only this minority of idealist MEPs have the motivation to engage and grasp public views no matter how scarce or difficult it is to collect them online. In the few rare instances when constituents have good intentions, the majority of the MEPs, prefer to redirect the citizens to non-Web 2.0 channels (email, telephone) for a private, secure interaction.

The design features of the existing platforms are deemed as limiting the deliberative potential. This is why MEPs request an institutional (EP) facilitation of online discussions to filter-out 'trolling' and open up the public sphere with other national audiences. However, their willingness depends on whether this initiative would affect their resources (funds, personnel, time). The limited MEP resources (time and personnel) restrict initiatives for more significant interaction while the effort allocated to strengthen the brand is proportional to the MEPs' anticipated electoral rewards. The electoral design (electoral system) imposes the MEPs to campaign regardless of their online presence. Social media is a preparatory stage for face-to-face tours throughout the constituency, which is not substituting the traditional exposure methods. The MEPs prefer old-school approaches (face-to-face, shaking hands) to be recognised as political figures. Eventually, Twitter & Facebook are used to link constituents to other repositories (e.g. personal webpage, newspapers, blogs, YouTube) to broadcast MEP positions in greater extent. As a result, bridging the distance (physical and emotional) from the constituents via SMPs happens indirectly. To do so, more than half of the interviewed MEPs (fourteen out of twenty four) prefer the construction of a profile based upon features of honesty, ability, integrity and ideology rather than that of a European Expert, in-line with Mansbridge's Selection Model. The accountability Information provided by the MEPs is also in-line with the prerequisites of the Selection Model and committing online is perceived as a form of preserving the brand, rather than a method to be accountable. Although the MEPs deny the use of descriptive features, they move unconsciously towards a 'descriptive' type of representation based upon two

prevailing brands (Expert vs One of Us) which reflect the requirements of the Selection Model.

To conclude, the MEPs see online participation as a worthy but risky investment. Because of the uncertainty of the social media framework (toxic scenery, biased participants, unclear gains, minimal regulation, and questionable audience penetration), they would prefer to keep the risk as low as possible. The risk they face is in the form of tangible and intangible costs. The first is associated with the resources they are willing to allocate (time, personnel, capital) and the second with their brand and reputation. They are therefore willing to engage, disseminate and interact online, aiming for the best possible results for both the constituents and themselves but not at the expense of their limited resources, unless there are clear and substantial gains (electoral or related to social influence). For most of the researched MEPs, the amount of everyday workload is so large, that there is no more time left to engage in social media any further unless they have their accounts administered on a permanent or industrial manner (recording speeches, taking pictures, uploading material, managing comments and incomings, redirecting, repository use, etc.). This requires a strategic plan and a considerable amount of resources to manage social media accounts.

To extend the framework, the thesis provides a typology of MEP orientations, motivations and incentives and for the first time, a typology for MEP online behaviour in accordance to two prevailing brands which dictate specific activities performed in SMPs. The thesis argues that an online participatory framework is feasible; one that facilitates the needs of both MEPs and constituents. It requires an open mind away from traditional representation narratives and an understanding of the natural tendency of the MEPs to pursue promotional activities. The thesis argues that Mansbridge's theory of representation is more appropriate to facilitate the particularities of the MEPs and more accommodative for the capacities of EU citizens to overcome the physical and emotional obstacles that keep them from engaging online. On the other hand, the harsh reality of the virtual arena brings in light its own arguments. The prevalence of profound statements and impressionistic quotes, the poor quality of the commentary, the lack of interest for anything 'old-school' and the general unwillingness for meaningful engagement, limit SMPs to be the vehicle to a solution; not the solution itself. To reach

the solution, the citizens need to stop reproducing online their predetermined impressions dictated by traditional media and to dare to generate new content.

The way each of the MEPs views and responds to online interactions is interconnected to the way he/she translates duties and prioritises obligations, in combination with personal political ambitions. This means that MEPs' understanding of their representative role is not always identical to what is considered to be a European parliamentarian's mission. The current motivation for most of the researched MEPs was to maintain or enhance their personalised brand either directly or indirectly through activities which might seem at first representational (accountability information, committing online, etc.) but stem from inner promotional motivations. For some of the MEPs, their political profile was shaped long before their election, and this necessitated protection and enhancement of the brand via brand-building activities. For some others the brand was new and initially constructed during the electoral campaign; this was at an emergent state and tended to be somewhat volatile requiring constant verification. The extent to which the participating MEPs allocate resources and effort to strengthen their brand is analogous with the anticipated electoral benefits. The thesis argues that it is the motivation of the MEPs, which defines the scope and boundaries of their online interaction. By predetermining or pre-assuming the boundaries, MEPs encourage or provoke interactions within these boundaries. In other words, if MEPs encourage social media processes and interaction that fall within brand-building or brand-enhancing boundaries, then constituents will respond accordingly, and this will have consequences for the quality and extent of the other two functions (the amount of policy discussion or the quality of the accountable information offered online).

Consequently, until an institutional e-participation platform (as described in subchapter 8.6) liberates the MEPs from social media management, it comes down to the MEPs' sense of responsibility, to prioritise substantive representation over branding, remembering that winning the battle of social media, will not deliver victory in the war of elections. As MEP13 pointed out, '*Facebook and Twitter friends will not turn up to your funeral*', so for the MEPs, the most critical aspect when using social media is to maintain an honest engagement with the constituents.

Bibliography

Albrecht, S. (2006). 'Whose voice is heard in online deliberation? A study of participation and representation in political debates on the internet', *Information, Community and Society*, *9*(1), 62-82.

Andeweg, R. B., & J. J. Thomassen (2005). 'Modes of political representation: Toward a new typology', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *30*(4), 507-528.

Armingeon, K. & B. Ceka (2014). European Union Politics, Vol.15 (I), 82-107

Armingeon, K. & K. Guthmann (2014). '*Democracy in crisis? The declining support for national democracy in European countries 2007-2011'*, European Journal of Political Research, 53, 423-442.

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). 'A ladder of citizen participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (4), 216-224.

Avellaneda, S.B. & N. Hardiman (2010). '*European economic crisis: Ireland in comparative perspective'*, American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington, 2-5 September, UCD Geary Institute.

Bagnoli, A. (2009). 'Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods', *Qualitative Research*, vol 9, no 5, pp 547-570.

Baarts, C. (2009). 'Stuck in the middle: Research ethics caught between science and politics', *Qualitative Research*, vol 9, issue 4, pp423-439.

Bale, T. (2005). European politics: A comparative introduction, (Palgrave: USA).

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory democracy for a new age*, *Berkley & Los Angeles*.

Baumgartner, J. C. & J. S. Morris (2010). 'Myfacetube politics: social networking web sites and political engagement of young adults', Social Science Computer Review, 28 (1), 24–44.

Beach, D. & R. Pedersen, (2013). Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines, (University of Michigan Press: USA).

Benson, J. (2019). Knowledge and Communication in Democratic Politics: Markets, Forums and Systems, *Political Studies*, 67 (2), 422–439.

Bentivegna, S. (2006). 'Rethinking politics in the world of ICTs. *European Journal of Communication',* 21 (3), 331-343.

Berelson, B. (1952). Content analysis in communications research, (New York: Free Press).

Best, S. & B. S. Krueger (2005). 'Analyzing the representativeness of internet political participation', *Political Behavior,* 27 (2), 183-216.

Bimber, B. & L. Copeland (2013). '*Digital Media and traditional political participation over time in the US*', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 10 (2): 125-37.

Bimber, B., Flanagin, A. & C. Stohl (2005). 'Reconceptualising collective action in the contemporary media environment', *Communication Theory*, vol. 15, pp. 389-413.

Block, E. S. & L. Erskine (2012). 'Interviewing by Telephone: Specific Considerations, Opportunities, and Challenges', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4), 428-445.

Booth, S. & C. Howarth (2014). The European Parliament: A failed experiment in pan-European democracy? Open Europe Report, London, UK.

Box-Steffensmeier, J. M., Brady, H. E. & D. Collier, eds. (2008). 'Political Science Methodology' in The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 1-34.

Brand, V. (2009). 'Empirical business ethics research and paradigm analysis', *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol 86, issue 4, pp 429-449.

Bray, Z. (2008). 'Ethnographic Approaches' in D. Della Porta and M. Keating, eds., Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 296-315.

Breindl, Y. (2010). 'Critique of the democratic potentials of the internet: A review of current theory and practice', *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society,* 8 (1), 43-59.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Bryman, A. (1988). Quantity and Quality in Social Research, (London: Routledge).

Burnham, P., Gilland K. L., Grant, W. & Z. Layton-Henry (2008). *Research Methods in Politics*, 2nd ed., (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan).

Burns, R. (2000). *Introduction to Research Methods*, 4th ed., London: Sage.

Burrell, G. & G. Morgan (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis: Elements of the sociology of corporate life*, chapter 3, (London: Heinemann).

Cain, B., Ferejohn, J. & M. Fiorino (1987). *The personal vote: Constituency service and electoral independence*, London: Harvard University Press.

Cini, M. & N. P-S. Borragan (2010). European Union politics, 3rd edition, (Oxford University Press).

Clements, B., Nanou, K. & S. Verney (2014). 'We no longer love you, but we don't want to leave you': The Eurozone crisis and popular Euroscepticism in Greece', *Journal of European Integration*, 36:3, 247-265.

Coleman, S. (2005). 'New Mediation and Direct Representation: Re-conceptualizing Representation in the Digital Age.' *New Media & Society* 7 (2): 177-98.

Coleman, S. (2004). '*The Network-empowered Citizen: How people share civic knowledge online',* Oxford Internet Institute paper. Available at: http://www.ippr.org.uk/uploadedFiles/research/projects/Digital_Society/the_networkempowered_citizen_coleman.pdf

Coleman, S. (2001). 'Online Campaigning', in Britain Votes 2001, ed. P. Norris, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 115-24.

Corbin, J. & A. Strauss (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks-USA: Sage Publications.

Costello, R., Thomassen, J. & M. Rosema (2012). 'European Parliament elections and political representation: Policy congruence between voters and parties', *West European Politics,* 35 (6), 1226.

Cryer, R. (2011). *Research Methodologies in EU and International Law*, (Oxford, UK: Hart)

D'Agostino, F. (1996). 'Contemporary approaches to the social contract', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=contractarianism-contemporary

Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication, and democracy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2005). 'The Internet, Public Spheres and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation.' *Political Communication* 22:147-62.

Dai, X. (2007). 'Prospects and Concerns of e-Democracy at the European Parliament', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13, 3, 370-387.

Dai, X., & P. Norton (2007a). 'The Internet and Parliamentary Democracy in Europe', The Journal of Legislative Studies, 13, 3, 342-353.

Dai, X., & Philip Norton (2007b). 'Parliamentary Democracy Online: Lessons from Europe', The Journal of Legislative Studies, 13, 3, 477-482.

Davies, P. H. J. (2001). 'Spies as Informants: Triangulation and the Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of the Intelligence and Security Services', *Politics*, 21(1), 73-80.

De Zúñiga, G., Veenstra, H., & E. Vraga (2010). 'Digital Democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 7 (1), 36-51.

Deligiaouri, A. (2013). 'Open governance and e-rulemaking: online deliberation and policy-making in contemporary Greek politics', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 10 (1), 104-124.

Denzin, N. K. & Y. S. Lincoln (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K. (2009). 'The Elephant in the Living Room: Or Extending the Conversation about the Politics of Evidence', Qualitative Research, 9(2), 139-160.

D'heer, E. & P. Verdegem (2014). 'Conversations about the elections on Twitter: Towards a structural understanding of Twitter's relation with the political and the media field', *European Journal of Communication,* 29 (6), 720-734.

Disch, L. (2011). 'Toward a mobilization conception of democratic representation', *American Political Science Review*, 105(01), 100-114.

Drisko, J. & T. Maschi, (2015). Content analysis: Pocket guide to social work research, (New York-USA: Oxford University Press).

Easton, D. (1975). A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support, British Journal of Political Science, 5(4), 435-457.

Eichenberg, R. C. & R. J. Dalton (1993). 'Europeans and the European Community: The dynamics of public support for European integration', *International Organization*, 47(4), 507-534.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). 'Building Theories from Case Study Research', Academy of Management Review, 14(4), 532-550.

European Commission (2016). 'EU eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020 - Accelerating the digital transformation of government'. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016DC0179

Fisher, J., D. Cutts & E. Fieldhouse (2011). 'Constituent Campaigning 2010' in *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election*, eds D. Wring, R. Mortimore & S. Atkinson, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 198-217.

Fleetwood, S. (2004). 'The Ontology of Organisation and Management Studies' in Ackroyd, S. and Fleetwood, S., Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies, (London: Routledge).

Flick, U. (2009). An Introduction to Qualitative Research, 4th edition, (London: Sage).

Follesdal, A. & S. Hix (2006). 'Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik', Journal of Common Market Studies, vol 44, no 3, pp 533-562. Available at: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x/pdf

Fominaya, C. F. (2017). 'European anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests in the wake of the global financial crisis', Social Movement Studies, 16:1.

Foster, C. & J. Frieden (2017). 'Crisis of trust: Socio-economic determinants of Europeans' confidence in government', European Union Politics, Vol. 18 (4), 511-535.

Fraile, M. & D. Di Mauro, (2010). 'The Economic Crisis and Public Opinion About Europe', EUDO Spotlight 2010/01, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute.

Frame, A., & G. Brachotte (2014). 'Le tweet stratégique: Use of Twitter as a PR tool by French politicians', *Public Relations Review*, 41, 278-287.

Galais-Gonzalez, C. (2010). 'Internet use and engaged citizenship in comparative perspective', *Internet Politics Policy 2010: An Impact Assessment Conference*, Oxford Internet Institute, Available at: http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/ipp2010/system/files/IPP2010_Galais-Gonzalez_Paper.pdf

Gauja, A. (2015). 'The individualisation of party politics: The impact of changing internal decision-making processes on policy development and citizen engagement', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations,* 17 (1), 89-105.

Gauthier, D. (1977). 'The Social Contract as ideology', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol 6, no 2, pp 130-164.

George, A. L., & A. Bennett (2005). Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Gerring, J. (2004). 'What is a Case Study and What is it Good for?,' American Political Science Review, 98(2), 341-354.

Gilbert, N. (2008). Researching Social Life, 3rd ed., (London: Sage).

Gillham, B. (2005). *Research Interviewing: The range of techniques*, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Glassman, M. E., Strauss, J. R. & C.J. Shogan (2010). 'Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Member Use of Twitter During a two-month Period in the 111th Congress.' *Journal of Communication Research* 2 (2-3): 219-33.

Glencross, A. (2009). 'E-Participation in the legislative process - lessons from estonia for enhancing democratic empowerment', EUI Paper, Florence, Italy. Available at: http://siyasaliletisim.org/pdf/siyasaliletisimveinternet/GlencrossEParticipationEstoniaRoyalHolloway.pdf

Goldbeck, J., Grimes, J. M. & A. Rogers (2010). 'Twitter use by the U.S. Congress.' *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 61 (8): 1612-21.

Goldstein, K. (2002). 'Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews', Political Science and Politics, 35(4), 669-67.

Guzman, F., Paswan, A. K., & E. Van Steenburg (2015). Self-referencing and political candidate brands: A congruency perspective. Journal of Political Marketing, 14(1-2), 175-199.

Hardouvelis, G. A. & I. Gkionis (2016). A decade long economic crisis: Cyprus versus Greece, Cyprus Economic Policy Review, Vol. 10, No. 2, 3-40

Hennink, M. (2007). *International Focus Group Research*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Hennink, M., I. Hutter & A. Bailey, (2011). *Qualitative Research Methods*, (London: Sage).Hesse-Biber, S., N. & P. Leavy (2005). *The practice of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

Héritier, A. (2008). 'Causal Explanation' in D. Della Porta and M. Keating, eds., Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 61-79.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. & P. Leavy, (2006). The practice of Qualitative Research, (London: Sage).

Hill & Knowlton Strategies. 2015. Infographic about MEPs on Twitter, 15 April 2015, http://43utcdbre7r3eer0x3d29s51.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/HK-infographic-most-influential-MEPs-on-Twitter.pdf

Hix, S. (2008). What's wrong with the European Union & how to fix it, (Polity: Cambridge).

Hoffmann, L. & E. Monaghan (2011). 'Public Debate on the Future of the European Union: A Viable Legitimising Strategy?', *Politics*, vol 31, no 3, 140-147.

Holstein, J. & J. Gubrium (2004). 'The active interview', chap. 8, in Silverman, D., *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, London: Sage.

Holstein, J. & J. Gubrium, (2003). Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns, (London: Sage).

Holsti, O. (1969). Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities, (Reading-USA: Addison-Wesley).

Holt, A. (2010). 'Using the Telephone for Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note', Qualitative Research, 10(1), 113-121.

Howard, P., Savage, S., Flores-Saviaga, C., Toxtli, C., & A. Monroy-Hernández (2017). 'Social media, civic engagement, and the slacktivism hypothesis: lessons from Mexico's El Bronco', Journal of International Affairs, 70 (1), 55–73.

Irvine, A. (2011). 'Duration, Dominance and Depth in Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews: A Comparative Exploration,' International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10(3), 202-220.

Jackman, S. (2008). 'Measurement' in J. M. Box-Steffensmeier, H.E. Brady and D. Collier, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 119-151.

Jackson, N. A. (2007a). 'Political Parties, the Internet and the 2005 General Election: Third Time Lucky?' *Internet Research* 17 (3): 249-71.

Jackson, N. A. & D. G. Lilleker (2007b). 'Seeking unmediated political information in a mediated environment: The uses and gratifications of political parties' e-newsletters', Information, Community and Society, 10 (2), 242-264.

Jackson, N. A. & D. G. Lilleker (2011). 'Microblogging, constituency service and impression management: UK MPs and the use of Twitter', *Journal of Legislative Studies,* 17 (1), 86-105.

Jackson, N. A. & D. G. Lilleker (2009). 'MPs and e-representation: Me, MySpace and I', *British Politics,* 4 (2), 236-264.

Jackson, N. A. & D. G. Lilleker (2007). 'Seeking unmediated political information in a mediated environment: The uses and gratifications of political parties'e-newsletters', *Information, Community and Society*, 10 (2), 242-264.

Jacobs, K. (2006). 'Discourse Analysis' in M. Walter, ed., Social Research Methods: An Australian Perspective (Melbourne, AU: Oxford University Press), 135-1.

James, N. & H. Busher (2006). 'Credibility, authenticity and voice: Dilemmas in online interviewing', *Qualitative Research*, vol 6, issue 3, pp 403-420.

Kalnes, Ø. (2009). 'Norwegian parties and Web 2.0', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 6 (3-4), 251-266.

Kaplan, A.M. & M. Haenlein (2010). 'Users of the world, Unite! The Challenges and opportunities of social media', *Business Horizons*, 53, 1, 59-68.

Karlsson, M. (2013). 'Representation as interactive communication: Theoretical considerations and empirical findings', *Information, Communication & Society,* 16 (8), 1201.

Katz, R. (2000). 'Elite attitudes and the democratic deficit in the European Union', Paper presented at the workshop "Competing Conceptions of Democracy in the Practice of Politics," ECPR Joint Sessions, Copenhagen 14-19 April 2000. Available at: https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/3ed4ce15-e696-4f7e-b1bc-2a60f247d2b2.pdf

King, G., Keohane, R. O. & S. Verba, (1994). Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

King, N. (2004). 'Using Interviews in Qualitative Research', in Cassel Catherine and Symon Gillian (eds) Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research, pp. 11-22, (London: Sage).

Kountouri, F. & A. Nikolaidou (2019). Bridging dominant and critical frames of the Greek debt crisis: mainstream media, independent journalism and the rise of a political cleavage, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 27:1, 96-108.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). Content Analysis: An introduction to its methodology, 2nd edition, (Thousand Oaks-USA: Sage Publications).

Kvale, S. & S. Brinkmann, (2009). Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing, 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.).

Kvale, S. (1983). 'The qualitative research interview: a phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding', Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 14: 171-96.

Kymlicka, W. & W. Norman (2000). *Citizenship in diverse societies,* Oxford University Press, 2000.

Lafont, C. (2015), Deliberation, Participation & Democratic Legitimacy, Journal of Political Philosophy, 23 (1), 40-63.

Larsson, A. O. (2015). 'The EU Parliament on Twitter - Assessing the Permanent Online Practices of Parliamentarians.' *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12 (2): 149-66.

Larsson, A. O., & H. Moe (2011). 'Studying Political Microblogging: Twitter Users in the 2010 Swedish Election Campaign.' *New Media & Society* 15 (5): 729-47.

Lavdas, K. (2002). (in Greek) European ideological routes during the 2nd half of the 20th century and the post-soviet era, HOU Publications, Patras, Greece.

Law, J. (2004). After Method: Mess in Social Science Research, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge).

Lee, E. & S. Y. Shin (2014). '*When the Medium is the Message: How Transportability Moderates the Effects of Politicians' Twitter Communication*.' Communication Research 41 (8): 1088-1110.

Leech, B. L. (2002). 'Interview Methods in Political Science' PS: Political Science and Politics, 35(4), 663-664.

Leontidou, L., Fragonikolopoulos, C. & N. Maravegias (2008). (in Greek) The EU in the dawn of the 3rd millennia: Institutions, Organisation and Policies, HOU Publications, Patras, Greece.

Leston-Bandeira, C. (2014). 'The pursuit of legitimacy as a key driver for public engagement: The European Parliament case', *Parliamentary Affairs,* 67 (2), 415.

Lilleker, D. G. (2015). 'Interactivity and branding: Public political communication as a marketing tool', *Journal of Political Marketing,* 14 (1-2), 111-128.

Lilleker, D. G. & K. Koc-Michalska (2013). 'Online political communication strategies: MEPs, e-representation, and self-representation', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 10 (2), 190-207.

Lilleker, D. G. & T. Vedel (2013). 'The internet in campaigns and elections' in W. Dutton, The *Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies,* ch.19, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/20307/4/Lilleker-Vedel_2013.docx.pdf

Liu, N., & X. Zhang (2013). 'The Influence of Group Communication, Government-Citizen Interaction, and Perceived Importance of New Media on Online Political Discussion.' *Policy & Internet* 5 (4): 444-61.

Lyrintzis, C. (2011). 'Greek politics in the era of economic crisis: Reassessing causes and effects', GreeSE paper no 45, The Hellenic Observatory, LSE. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33826/1/GreeSE_No45.pdf

Majone, G. (2006). 'Is the European constitutional settlement really successful and stable?' Notre Europe, October 2006. Available at: https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/moravcsik-reponse-majone-en_02.pdf

Malkoutzis, N. (2011). 'Young Greeks and the crisis', International Policy Analysis, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/08465.pdf

Manheim, J., Rich, R. C., Willnat, L., Brians, C. L. & J. Babb, (2012). Empirical Political Analysis, 7th edition, (Harlow: Pearson Education).

Mansbridge, J. (2011). 'Clarifying the concept of representation', *American Political Science Review*, 105, 3, 621-630.

Mansbridge, J. (2009). 'A selection model of political representation', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17, 4, 369-398.

Mansbridge, J. (2003). Rethinking representation, *American Political Science Review*, *97*(04), 515-528.

Mansbridge, J. (2000). 'What does a representative do? Descriptive representation in communicative settings of distrust, uncrystallised interests and historically

denigrated status', chapter 4 in Kymlicka, W. & Norman W. (eds), *Citizenship in Diverse Societies,* Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.

Marcinkowski, F. & J. Metag (2014). 'Why do candidates use online media in constituency campaigning? An application of the theory of planned behaviour', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 11 (2), 151-168.

Marsh, D. & G. Stoker, eds., (2010). 'Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches' in Theory and Methods in Political Science, 3rd ed., (Basingstoke, UK:Palgrave Macmillan), 249-266.

Marvasti, A. B., (2004). *Qualitative Research in Sociology*, (London: Sage).

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage).

May, T. (2011). *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 4th ed., Open University Press: McGraw, Berkshire.

Medimorec, D., Parycek, P. & J. Schossbock (2011). 'Vitalizing democracy through e-participation and open government: An Austrian and eastern European perspective', *Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation* paper. pp5/11/2014.Available at: http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-9CAA7CF5-908C191E/bst/Daniel%20Medimorec.pdf [Accessed 5/11/2014]

Monaghan, E. (2012). 'Assessing Participation and Democracy in the EU: The Case of the European Citizens' Initiative', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society,* Vol. 13, No. 3, 285-298.

Monaghan, E. (2008). 'Communicating Europe': The Role of Organised Civil Society', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.18-31.

Morgan, G. (1980). 'Paradigms, metaphors and puzzle solving in organization theory', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol 25, no 4, pp 605-622.

Morgan, D. (2004). 'Focus Groups', chap 13 in Hesse-Biber S. N. and Leavy P. (eds), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mousis, N. (2008). (in Greek) The EU Law, Economy and Politics, 12th edition, Papazisis Publications, Athens-Greece.

Murthy, D. (2015). 'Twitter and elections: are tweets, predictive, reactive, or a form of buzz?', *Information, Communication & Society,* 18 (7), 816-831.

Oakley, A. (1981). 'Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms', pp. 30-61, in Roberts H., *Doing Feminist Research*, London: Routledge.

Olsen, W. (2004). 'Triangulation in Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods can really be Mixed', in Holborn Martin and Haralambos Michael (eds), 'Developments in Sociology', Ormskirk: Causeway Press.

Opdenakker, R. (2006). 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research', Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, v. 7, n. 4, Sep. 2006.

Oser, J., Leighley, J. E. & K. M. Winneg (2014). 'Participation, online and otherwise: What's the difference for policy preferences?', *Social Science Quarterly,* 95 (5), 1259-1277.

Papaloi, A., & D. Gouscos (2011). 'E-Parliaments and novel parliament-to-citizen services', *E-Journal of Democracy and Open Government*, *3*(1), 80-98.

Papazoglou, M. (2010). (in Greek) 'Europeanisation and democratic deficits: The meaning of the legitimacy crisis', ELIAMEP working Paper No9, Available at: https://www.eliamep.gr/publication/europeanisation-and-democratic-deficits-the-concept-of-%E2%80%9Clegitimization%E2%80%99s-crisis%E2%80%9D/

Peräkylä, A. (2005). 'Analyzing Talk and Text' in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, eds., The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd ed., (London, UK: SAGE Publications, Inc.), 869-886.

Pich, C. & D. Dean (2015). 'Political branding: sense of identity or identity crisis? An investigation of the transfer potential of the brand identity prism to the UK Conservative Party', *Journal of Marketing Management,* 31, 11-12, 1353-1378.

Pich, C., Dean, D. & K. Punjaisri (2014). 'Political brand identity: An examination of the complexities of Conservative brand and internal market engagement during the 2010 UK General Election campaign', *Journal of Marketing Communications,* 22, 1, 100-117.

Pinker, R. (1971). *Social theory and social policy*, (Heinemann Educational Publishers).

Pitkin, H. F. (2004). 'Representation and democracy: uneasy alliance', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, *27*(3), 335-342.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation,* Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Ponterroto, J. (2005). 'Qualitative research in counselling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol 52, issue 2, pp 126-136.

Quinlan, S., Shephard, M. & L. Paterson (2015). 'Online discussion and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum: Flaming keyboards or forums for deliberation?', *Electoral Studies,* 38 (0), 192-205.

Ramcharan, P. & J. R. Cutcliffe (2001). 'Judging the ethics of qualitative research: considering the 'ethics as process' model', *Health and Social Care in the Community*, vol9, issue 6, pp 358-366.

Renwick, A. (2010). *The politics of electoral reform: changing the rules of democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Rubin, B. (2012). 'Shifting social contracts and the sociological imagination', *Social Forces,* Vol. 91, No. 2, pp. 327-346.

Rubin, H. J., & I. S. Rubin, (2005). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed., (London, UK: SAGE Publications, Inc.).

Sani, G. & B. Magistro (2016). Increasingly unequal: The economic crisis, social inequalities and trust in the European Parliament in 20 European countries, European Journal of Political Research, 55: 246-264.

Saward, M. (2006). 'The representative claim', *Contemporary Political Theory,* 5 (3), 297-318.

Scammell, M. (2015). Politics and image: the conceptual value of branding. Journal of Political Marketing, 14 (1-2), 7-18.

Simmons, G. (2007). 'i-branding: Developing the internet as a branding tool', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 25 (2), 544-562.

Smith, G. (2001). 'The 2001 general election: Factors influencing the brand image of political parties and their leaders', *Journal of Marketing Management*, *17*(9-10), 989-1006.

Snape, D., Ormston, R., Barnard, M. & L. Spencer (2003). In Ritchie, J. & J. Lewis, (eds.), Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers, (SAGE).

Southern, R. (2015). 'Is web 2.0 providing a voice for outsiders?', A comparison of personal web site and social media use by candidates at the 2010 UK general election. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 12 (1), 1-17.

Stamati, T., Papadopoulos, T. & D. Anagnostopoulos (2015). 'Social media for openness and accountability in the public sector: Cases in the Greek context', *Government Information Quarterly,* 32 (1), 12-29.

Stanyer, J. (2008). Elected representatives, online self-presentation and the personal vote: Party, personality and webstyles in the United States and United Kingdom. Information, Community & Society, 11(3), 414-432.

Stedward, G. (1997). 'On the Record: An Introduction to Interviewing' in P. Burnham, ed., Surviving the Research Process in Politics, (London, UK: Pinter), 151-166.

Stieglitz, S. & L. Dang-Xuan (2013). 'Social media and political communication: a social media analytics framework', *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, vol 3, issue 4, p. 1277-1291.

Sturges, J. E., & K. J. Hanrahan, (2004). 'Comparing telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing: a research note', Qualitative Research, 4(1), 107-118.

Schwandt, T. A., (1997). *Qualitative Inquiry*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).

Tansey, O. (2007). 'Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-probability Sampling,' Political Science and Politics, 40(4), 1-24.

Tapscott, D. (2004). 'E-Government in the 21st Century - moving from industrial to digital government', New Paradigm Learning Corporation Paper, Toronto, Canada. http://global.sap.com/canada/industries/publicsector/pdf/Misc_EGov_White Paper.pdf

Theocharis, Y., Lowe, W., van Deth, J. W. & G. García-Albacete (2015). 'Using Twitter to mobilize protest action: online mobilization patterns and action repertoires in the Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, and Aganaktismenoi movements', *Information, Communication & Society,* 18 (2), 202-220.

Tsoukas, H. & C. Knudsen (2005). *The Oxford handbook of organization theory*, Introduction, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Urbinati, N. (2000). 'Representation as advocacy: a study of democratic deliberation', *Political theory*, 28 (6), 758-786.

Valinakis, I., Kazakos, P. & N. Maravegias (2013). *Exiting the crisis: Applicable alternative proposals*, University of Athens Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence, Athens.

van Deventer, J. P (2009). 'Ethical considerations during human centred overt and covert research', *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology,* vol. 43, issue 1, pp 45-57.

Varnali, K. & V. Gorgulu (2015). 'A social influence perspective on expressive political participation in Twitter: the case of #OccupyGezi', *Information, Communication & Society,* 18 (1), 1-16.

Vasilopoulou, S. (2018). The party politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: The case of Greece. *Politics*, 38 (3), 311–326.

Vasilopoulou, S. & K. Gattermann (2013). 'Matching policy preferences: the linkage between voters and MEPs', *Journal of European Public Policy,* 20 (4), 606-625.

Vedel, T. (2003). 'Political communication in the age of the internet', in Maarek, P. J. and Wolfsfeld, G., Political *Communication in a New Era*, p.41-59, Routledge, London, UK.

Vicente-Merino, M. R. (2007). 'Websites of Parliamentarians across Europe', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13,3, 441-457,

Vissers, S., & D. Stolle (2014). 'The Internet and new modes of political participation: online versus offline participation', *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(8), 937-955.

Waldron, J. (1989). 'John Locke: Social contract versus political anthropology', *The Review of Politics*, vol 51, no 1, pp 3-28.

Walsh, K. C. (2004). *Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Warren, T. (2018). The European Parliament and the eurozone crisis: An exceptional actor? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(3), 632-651.

Wright, S. (2009). 'Political blogs, representation and the public sphere', in B. Guner (Ed.), *Aslib Proceedings* (Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 155-169). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Wright, S., & J. Street (2007). 'Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums.' *New Media & Society* 9, 5, 74-86.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).

Yin, R. (2003). *Applications of Case Study Research*, 2nd edition, Applied Social Research Methods Series, 34, (London: Sage).

APPENDIX I - The Interview Request Letter

FROM: Mr Ioannis Zisis
Doctoral Researcher, School of Law & Politics, University of Hull, UK
Tel.: 0044 ....., Email: i.zisis@hull.ac.uk

TO: The Honourable Member of the European Parliament Mr/Ms .....

Hull, ../../201..

Dear Mr/Ms .....,

I am contacting you as a Doctoral Researcher in Politics at the University of Hull in the UK. I am researching the influence of social media on political participation, emphasising on the views and the role of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from Greece, Cyprus and Ireland. I am investigating how the MEPs from these crisis-inflicted states perceive the role of social media in relation to accountability, policy discussion and political branding.

I would be grateful if you could spare a few minutes out of your busy schedule, giving me the privilege to interview you as an expert, about your interactions with your constituents. It would be extremely valuable for my research if I could learn more about your online experiences, your views and impressions, as well as your incentives or resentments to use online platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The interview can take place in a location and date that would be most appropriate and convenient for you. I may be organising a fieldwork trip to Brussels during the weeks of the Parliamentary Committee sessions around ..... Nevertheless, if there is any other date or location that would suit you best, please let me know.

The Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form accompanying this letter, provide details on the purpose of my research, the interview process and other issues of concern. If you decide to participate in this study I will proceed to the necessary arrangements with your office and you will need to sign and return the Consent Form. By signing the Consent Form you also grant me permission to collect, analyse and use content from your social media accounts, for research purposes.

It would be a true honour if you accept to participate in this research project. I will be more than happy to answer any questions you might have and offer any clarification as to the nature of my research or of the requested interview.

I look forward to hearing back from you and hopefully have a productive conversation in the near future.

Kind Regards,

Ioannis Zisis
Doctoral Researcher
Hull, UK.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title: *Bridging democratic gaps or building political brands? Perceptions of representation from the participation of MEPs in social media.*
Researcher: Mr Ioannis Zisis, School of Law & Politics, University of Hull

Purpose of the Interview:
You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study by attending an interview. It is anticipated that approximately 20-30 Members of the European Parliament will take part in this study. The Researcher will use the data collected during the interview, to answer Research Questions and finalise a Doctoral Thesis. It is envisaged that the collected data will be analysed and used for the production of research papers and articles that may be presented in conferences or published in peer-reviewed journals and other media.

What is requested from you:
You are asked to participate in discussion with the Researcher and answer a series of questions. The discussion will be relevant but not limited to a set of themes that will be forwarded to you after you sign and return the Consent Form and after an interview date is scheduled. The interview should last from 30-50 minutes, and it will take place in a location of mutual convenience at an agreed date and time. The Researcher requests to be allowed to record the interview and keep notes on paper or by typing. The Researcher may also collect and analyse content from your public social media accounts in relation to the research questions and the interview theme.

Issues of concern: Anonymity, Confidentiality, Withdrawal.
All data collected during the interview, the voice/image records and notes and every piece of information or comment made, will be treated with privacy and confidentiality and will be stored with safety and appropriate access rights in secure cabinets and electronic storage facilities within University premises. Your name and organisational identity will not be used when the data is written up. If any information about you is to be published, it will take such a form that you will not be recognisable, and anonymity will be preserved. The Researcher will keep a copy of every participant's name as indicated in the Consent Form, but the later will not be kept alongside the data. Once you agree to participate, you will be assigned a code/number which will be used by the Researcher in order to organise the information gained from your responses. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to interrupt the interview at any time and withdraw from the study. Withdrawing from the procedure will not result in any loss of your rights or any adverse consequences. Any information gathered until such time will not be used and will be destroyed.

Next Steps:
If you wish to continue with the arrangement of an interview, please read, fill-in, sign and return the Consent Form to the Researcher. Once the date of the interview is set, you will receive a Verification Letter. If there are any issues or complaints concerning the research you must contact the Researcher who will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any time.

CONSENT FORM

Project Title:	Bridging democratic gaps or building political brands? Perceptions of representation from the participation of MEPs in social media.
Researcher:	Ioannis Zisis, School of Law & Politics, University of Hull, UK

Participant Declaration

By signing below, I agree that:

- ✓ *I have read and understood the **Interview Request Letter** and the **Participant Information Sheet** provided by the Researcher.*
- ✓ *I was given the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and all of my questions have been satisfactorily answered.*
- ✓ *The aims, methods, anticipated benefits and possible risks/hazards of the study have been explained to me, and I have received adequate information to offer my consent.*

By signing below, I also declare that I understand the following:

- *I consent to the collection and analysis of any content published at my social media accounts for the purpose of this research.*
- *I grant permission to the Researcher to record and take notes during an interview and to use the interview recording for the purpose of his research. In the case that unforeseen circumstances force me to respond in writing to any questions provided by the Researcher (e.g. due to a last-minute interview cancellation or a request for additional answers), I verify that any information given this way will be my own and no person other than me will reply wholly or partially to the Researcher's questions.*
- *Any information that I provide in confidence will not be made public in a way or form that could reveal my identity to an outside party i.e. I will remain anonymous. The collected data will be coded and my name and address kept separately from it.*
- *The collected data, their analysis and the produced results will be used for scholarly and educational purposes and may be published in scientific and academic journals (including online publications), conferences, non-academic publications or media. The data may also be stored in an institutional repository (e.g. University of Hull Hydra Repository) and be publically shared for academic purposes.*
- *The collected data will be stored, managed and protected according to the University of Hull rules and guidelines for the duration of the study. They may be disposed of by the Researcher after the study is over unless they are required for future scholarly/academic purposes.*
- *My participation in this project is voluntary as an expert in the researched field and I will not be paid for my participation.*
- *I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.*

Taking into account all of the above considerations, I hereby consent to participate in the study undertaken by the Researcher. The study and my role in it have been explained to my satisfaction and I voluntarily and freely agree to take part.

Signature of the Participant & Date .....

The following are the abbreviated names used in the body of the Thesis for the MEPs from Greece, Ireland and Cyprus who were interviewed for this research. The MEPs have remained anonymous as requested in accordance with the terms of the Consent Agreement.

MEP1: Face-to-Face interview taken on 12/07/2016.
MEP2: Face-to-Face interview taken on 13/07/2016.
MEP3: Face-to-Face interview taken on 13/07/2016.
MEP4: Face-to-Face interview taken on 31/08/2016.
MEP5: Face-to-Face interview taken on 31/08/2016.
MEP6: Face-to-Face interview taken on 05/09/2016.
MEP7: Face-to-Face interview taken on 05/09/2016.
MEP8: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP9: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP10: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP11: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP12: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP13: Face-to-Face interview taken on 06/09/2016.
MEP14: Telephone interview taken on 31/01/2017.
MEP15: Telephone interview taken on 02/02/2017.
MEP16: Telephone interview taken on 04/05/2017.
MEP17: Telephone interview taken on 11/05/2017.
MEP18: Telephone interview taken on 22/05/2017.
MEP19: Telephone interview taken on 30/05/2017.
MEP20: Telephone interview taken on 07/06/2017.
MEP21: Telephone interview taken on 20/06/2017.
MEP22: Face-to-Face interview taken on 11/07/2017.
MEP23: Face-to-Face interview taken on 14/07/2017.
MEP24: Face-to-Face interview taken on 18/07/2017.

AGENDA OF INTERVIEW THEMES

INTRODUCTORY Qs

Main motivation to use social media accounts
Platform mostly used
Assistants monitoring accounts
Content mostly uploaded- topics addressed (local/national/EU)
Meaning of retweeting/sharing
Scenery-crisis-sentiment expression
Followers' synthesis-who are they-features of those interacting
Public opinion collection-best way?

ACCOUNTABILITY Qs

Topics on committee work-Inform on legislative process-parliamentary work?
Is accountability an obligation?
Is it legitimising?
Fulfil a duty? Other actions needed?
Commit online for policies/votes-publish voting behaviour
Committing on what basis? Public/partisan/personal

POLICY DISCUSSION Qs

Express views on policies (partisan/personal)-party message
Policy discussion online? How much? How serious/extensive? Specific topics?
Contributions/proposals/suggestions?
Meaningful/superficial
Exploitation of proposals? Institutional processes?
Resources allocated? (people/money/time)
Are the platforms adequate? Co-production feasible?
Security/filters/administration of process?

BRANDING Qs

SMPs as marketing tools-advantages over traditional methods
Maintain/enhance the brand with consistency?
Face to face vs faceless
Steady message? Promotional material? Repository?
Descriptive features? Attachment to audiences
Ideology-views vs personality/integrity
Electoral benefits
Campaigning vs routine timeframe
Expert-inside knowledge-educating/correcting

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS Qs

Are MEPs getting closer to constituents? Gap-bridging
Most important feature of social media?
What function prevails today in social media - What would you like for the future
Willingness to engage more-invest more?

AC Categories	Volume of tweets	Explanation
Article	**46**	Online or press article written by MEPs about EU issues
Amendment	**6**	Information regarding MEPs' work on amendments
Ask	**7**	MEPs requesting information from constituents
Colleague	**21**	Reference to other MEPs and common activities
Commentary	**126**	MEP comments on EU developments
Descriptive	**153**	affiliation with descriptive features
EP intervention	**129**	MEP interventions in the Plenary
EP news	**106**	News about the EP
EP work	**129**	Work and assignments related to Committees
Events	**120**	Events MEPs attend related to non-campaigning
Feedback	**38**	Providing feedback or replying questions with no dialogue
Info	**166**	Evidenced about the policies and EP/Commission processes
Image/Sound	**33**	Image, Sound and video recordings reproduced online
Interview	**310**	Mainstream media appearances (tv, radio)
Links SM	**95**	links to sources of info via other social media
Links TM	**230**	links to sources of info via traditional media
Live	**28**	Live broadcast of MEP activity
Meet	**66**	Meetings related to EP work
Party	**93**	Party or party-group activities
Press	**25**	Official press releases
Question	**125**	Officially submitted MEP questions
Report	**24**	MEPs' reference to official EU reports
Review	**14**	MEPs' self-assessment reviewing productivity
RT	**933**	Retweets
Speech	**21**	EU-related speeches given during events
Statement	**181**	informative reference to an issue without critique
Summary	**17**	MEP-produced summaries of work
Update	**56**	Updating with information on an ongoing issue
Vote	**59**	Information about voting behaviour and voting intentions in EP
TOTAL	**3357**	

Table 5 Tweet Analysis – Accountability categories

PD Categories	Volume of tweets	Explanation
Article	**68**	Online or press article written with policy reference
Amendment	**6**	Information regarding MEPs' work on amendments
Ask	**15**	Requesting ideas and proposals about the EU policies
Commentary	**136**	MEP comments on EU policies
Conversation	**149**	policy conversation beyond the exchange 2-3 tweets
Domestic	**383**	Reference to national/constituency issues or focus
EP intervention	**129**	MEP interventions in the Plenary
EP news	**106**	News about the EP to intrigue for discussion
EP work	**129**	activities, assignments and policy work related to Committees
EU topic	**146**	Reference to policies of EU-wide or international significance
Events	**66**	Events the MEPs attend to inform or promote a policy
Info	**166**	verifiable info about policies and EP/Commission processes
Integration	**43**	promote the message of EU integration
Links SM	**95**	links other social media
Links TM	**230**	links to traditional media (webpages, blogs, online press etc.)
Party	**54**	partisan structures, topics the parties consider important
Question	**125**	Officially submitted MEP questions
Redirect	**2**	Asking constituents to participate in a private conversation
RT	**630**	Retweets about Committee work on policies
Statement	**111**	Policy statement/position to provoke further discussion
Update	**56**	Updating with info on an ongoing issue, replies from institutions
Vote	**59**	voting behaviour and voting intentions in EP
TOTAL	**2904**	

Table 6 Tweet Analysis – Policy Discussion categories

BR Categories	Volume of tweets	Explanation
Ask	**15**	Asking constituents to offer support to causes
Campaign	**77**	promotional material related to MEPs campaigning efforts
Causes	**85**	Causes promoted online not related to EP work
Commentary	**138**	MEP comments revealing overall standpoint
Descriptive	**253**	designating special affiliation with descriptive features
Domestic	**383**	Reference to national/constituency issues
EP intervention	**129**	MEP interventions in the Plenary
EP work	**129**	activities, assignments and policy work related to Committees
EU topics	**146**	Reference to EU-wide or international policies
Events	**107**	Events the MEPs attend for publicity purposes and socialising
Info	**166**	verifiable info about policies and EP/Commission processes
Image/Sound	**33**	Image, Sound and video recordings reproduced
Interview	**310**	Mainstream media appearances (tv, radio)
Links SM	**95**	Providing links via social media
Links TM	**230**	Providing links via traditional media
Live	**28**	Live broadcast of MEP activity
Party	**104**	Party-related initiatives and party brand promotion
Question	**125**	Officially submitted MEP questions to EU institutions
Review	**14**	MEPs' self-assessment reviewing productivity
RT	**754**	Retweets about MEP activity with a promotional character
Speech	**60**	social event Speeches outside EP
Statement	**116**	statement expressing overall position
Update	**56**	Updating with info on an ongoing issue
Vote	**59**	Info about voting behaviour and voting intentions in EP
TOTALS	**3612**	

Table 7 Tweet Analysis - Branding categories

		AC	PD	BR
		3357	**2904**	**3612**
totals	**11307**	**9873**		
	collected	**categorised**		

Table 8.3.1a Sample of Tweets and theme allocation

MEPs	Tweets collected from 21/9/15 to 02/02/16	Tweets not categorised (discarded)	Tweets categorised in themes	AC	PD	BR
MEP1	2442	241	2201	815	544	842
MEP2	475	169	306	84	113	109
MEP3	0	0	0	0	0	0
MEP4	677	79	598	166	160	272
MEP5	1071	88	983	260	301	422
MEP6	550	71	479	184	127	168
MEP7	520	15	505	205	93	207
MEP8	324	24	300	113	98	89
MEP9	235	7	228	101	60	67
MEP10	1350	197	1153	413	423	317
MEP11	254	15	239	95	79	65
MEP12	250	28	222	74	67	81
MEP13	343	58	285	85	54	146
MEP14	232	19	213	55	61	97
MEP15	0	0	0	0	0	0
MEP16	552	181	371	128	139	104
MEP17	238	16	222	77	83	62
MEP18	123	1	122	46	34	42
MEP19	649	189	460	118	157	185
MEP20	1	0	1	0	1	0
MEP21	499	16	483	183	158	142
MEP22	73	10	63	21	11	31
MEP23	449	10	439	134	141	164
MEP24	0	0	0	0	0	0
	11307	1434	9873	3357	2904	3612

Table 8.3.1b Allocation of tweets per MEP

MEPs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	TOTALS
Idealists			√					√			√		3
Pragmatists	√			√	√		√			√			5
Cynical		√				√			√			√	4
MEPs	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	TOTALS
Idealists					√		√						2
Pragmatists	√	√	√	√		√			√		√	√	8
Cynical								√		√			2
Idealists	5	3, 8, 11, 17, 19											
Pragmatists	13	1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24											
Cynical	6	2, 6, 9, 12, 20, 22											

Table 8.5a Allocation of MEPs in orientation groups

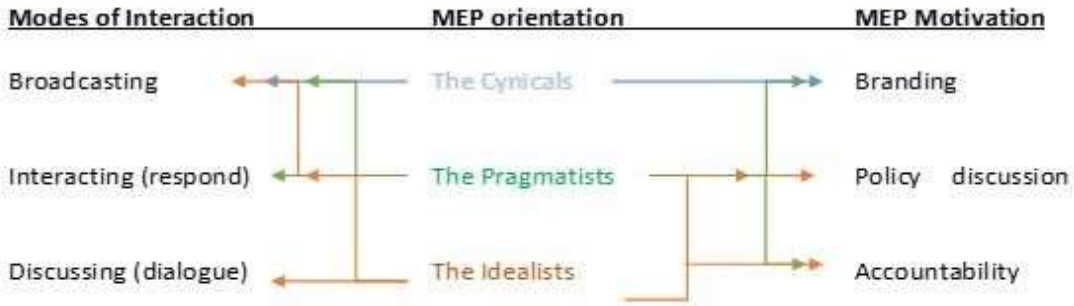

Figure 8.5b Interactional modes by orientation

	Idealist	Pragmatist	Cynical
Approach of SMPs	Optimistic	Sceptical	Indifferent
Use of SMPs	Engagement and discussion tools	Working tools	Promotional tools
Accountability	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Policy Discussion	Strong	Weak	Weak
Branding	Weak	Moderate	Strong
Online Tendency	Discuss / Interact	Interact / Broadcast	Broadcast
Aim	Mutual decision making	Connectivity and visibility	Publicity rewards
MEP Allocation	3, 8, 11, 17, 19	1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24	2, 6, 9, 12, 20, 22
Party Affiliation	GUE/NGL=4, S&D=1	EPP=6, GUE/NGL=4, S&D=3	EPP=4, S&D=1, GUE/NGL=1

Table 8.5c MEP orientations and interactional tendencies

	European Expert	One of Us
Feature	Expert knowledge and inside information	Approachability and 'normal' everyday behaviour
Priorities	Realistic expectations and feasibility (what is best for the EU)	Honesty, integrity and social concern (what is best for citizens)
Activity	'Educating' citizens' views	Sharing knowledge and accountable information
Role	Decision making	Decision sharing
Desire	Retain own power position	Empower citizens
MEP Allocation	1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20, 23 (TOTAL=10)	3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 24 (TOTAL=14)
Party Affiliation	EPP=9, GUE/NGL=1	GUE/NGL=8, S&D=5, EPP=1

Table 8.5d Prevailing brands among the researched MEPs

↓Orientation/Brand→	European Expert	One-of-Us
Idealists		3, 8, 11, 17, 19 (4 GUE/NGL + 1 S&D)
Pragmatists	1, 5, 10, 14, 18, 23 (6 EPP)	4, 7, 13, 15, 16, 21, 24 (4 GUE/NGL + 3 S&D)
Cynical	2, 6, 12, 20 (3 EPP 1 + GUE/NGL)	9, 22 (1 S&D + 1 EPP)

Table 8.5e Combination of Brands and MEP Orientations