MEPs 2.0? Europarlamentarians’ Communication Strategies in the Internet Era: General Developments and Individual Specificities

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I. Introduction

In the last decade, the massive use of new interactive technologies has increasingly characterized horizontal political competition (among the elites) and vertical political communication (between elites and voters) towards greater “personalization of politics” (Blondel 2005; Higley and Pakulski 2007). In particular, candidates’ personal websites have become the rule in many political environments and have grown both in number and sophistication. The wide variety of options available to the candidates ranges nowadays from simple front pages to extremely flexible and interactive platforms aimed at conveying bi-directional flows of communication between candidate and voters. Two basic objectives have been identified behind this trend: growing maximization of candidates’ electoral efforts and their willingness to get/keep in touch with their constituency once elected.

A widely known example of successful web-politics has been provided by the US presidential elections. According to many observers, the wide use of internet-based networks and interactive participatory tools within the framework of the electoral campaign has significantly contributed to determine the success of the democratic candidate. This was due to the fact that these non-standard forms of political communication effectively targeted and mobilized large social strata (such as young people and first time voters) usually disconnected from politics and deaf to politicians’ appeals. Along with a smart use of the most common social networks (from Facebook to MySpace), the creation of the platform my.barackobama.com helped millions of supporters in the US and around the world to organize their local communities on behalf of the candidate and to interact with him. According to Andrew Sullivan “it’s a new form of politics; it is likely to last beyond the Obama campaign and to change the shape of all campaigns to come. For Obama the new method was also bang on message. His liberalism is not a top-down, managerial variety; it’s more in line with progressive traditions of self-empowerment. A social network was the perfect medium”.

In Europe the phenomenon of internet-based political communication appear less sophisticated and more primitive in its expression; however there are indicators which confirm a rapid growth both at national and European level. Just a few months ago, the Party of the European Socialists (PES) lunched the initiative “Your manifesto”: an open consultation on its manifesto for the 2009 European elections. According to the organizers the consultation involved more than 300,000 visitors, 500 posts, 100 videos. Additionally, more than 3,000 activists joined the website of the

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initiative [http://elections2009.pes.org] during the process. A draft manifesto was drawn up on
the basis of that consultation, and discussed within the PES. The manifesto\(^3\) was finally adopted by
the plenum of the party in December 2008.

If we shift our focus to the individual level, the knowledge gap existing between national and
European experiences becomes evident. When it comes to the latter, not only the awareness of
the EU public is generally very limited, along with an almost inexistennt attention from the media,
but also scholarly interest seems focused on other – more traditional – dimensions of politics,
both in the European Parliament (EP) and outside it. To put it another way, web-politics of the
Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) still emerges as a grey zone. To what extent is the
story told above true when it comes to the MEPs? Is the general trend towards innovation of
political strategies also impacting MEPs’ electoral communication? Is it possible to identify the
defining traits of a European parliamentary dimension in this respect? The present paper
addresses these basic questions which – in our view – still lack credible answers. In other words,
we will assess the nature of the link between the features of the message and of the messenger. It
seems to us, that the unique nature of the EP – especially its plural and multinational character –
makes it a perfect laboratory to assess the determinants of MEPs’ communication strategies.

This study systematically looks at the nature of MEPs’ internet-based “web tools” and at the
extent to which their features reflect the complex nature of the EP environment (“Europeanization
of communication”). To conduct this operation, a variety of structural and graphic features of
MEPs’ websites have been identified, which have been made statistically analyzable, following a
process of standardization and categorization, and were finally collected into a unique dataset.
The preliminary figures obtained have been then controlled for a wide array of pluri-dimensional
factors, operating both at micro-/individual-level and at macro-/country-level.

Conceived as an explorative study towards clearer and more accurate understanding of MEPs’
internet-based communication styles and political strategies, our analysis aims at providing a
useful basis for further investigation in this direction and will deliberately avoid to formalize
hypotheses to test, rather attempting to provide helpful interpretative frameworks.

The paper proceeds as follows: moving from a short discussion of some relevant studies which
seem to justify our analytical curiosity (section II), we will describe the nature of our data and the
operationalization of our dependent variables and control factors (section III). We will then move
on to discuss the results of our analysis and comment the relevance of our findings (section IV).
The final part of the work looks at the broader implications of our results and develops some
general conclusions which provide room for further analysis (section V).

II. Helpful insights from the literature

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

\(^3\) The PES manifesto is available at http://www.pes.org/downloads/PES-Manifest_EN.pdf.
polymorphous relationship between the rise of new technologies and politics, adopting different theoretical perspectives and looking at the different kinds of actors involved (both actively and passively). Concerning the impact of new technologies on vertical political communication we can – broadly speaking – distinguish between those contributions focused on the demand-side of the relationship (voters) and those interested on the supply-side (collective or individual political actors).

A large part of the literature addresses individuals’ reaction to the rise of internet-based political communication (e-campaigns) in terms of political engagement. Those studies focus mainly on the US and West European post-industrial societies (Gilder 2000). While they still seem to reflect a long lasting debate between “cyber-enthusiasts” (Barber 1998; Budge 1996; Rash 1997; Rheingold 1993; Schwartz 1996) and “cyber-sceptics” (Foot and Schneider 2002; Margolis and Resnick 2000; Media Metrix, 2000), most of the authors agree on a moderate, nonetheless relevant, impact on voters’ mobilization (Gibson, Nixon, and Ward 2003). This marks a clear difference with the first seminal works which looked at the Internet as a potentially disruptive power (Corrado and Firestone 1996). Accordingly, Gibson et alii (2003, 232) argue that “party presence on the Internet seems to represent largely an additional element to a party’s repertoire of action along with more traditional communication forms rather than a transformation of the fundamental relationship between political parties and the public, as some earlier advocates of cyber democracy hoped”.

In recent years the debate has addressed the effect of the “internet revolution” on the existing societal structure in the Western world, in terms of political mobilization. Several authors increasingly regard the knowledge society as a Pandora’s Box reinforcing existing inequalities of power and wealth, generating deeper divisions between the information rich and poor (Golding 1996; Hayward 1995; Murdock and Golding 1989; Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman 2003). Among the most notable contributions, Norris (2006) speculates that more egalitarian patterns of competition may emerge with more opportunities for citizens’ participation. She concludes however that “the most popular forms of online activism are likely to reflect the preponderance of younger and well-educated populations using the Internet [...] until such a time as the online population eventually ‘normalizes’ to reflect a cross-section of the general electorate” (Norris 2006, 16). Following Norris’ perspective, although shifting his analytical focus, Lusoli (2005b) tests three behavioural models in relationship to the use of new technologies (equalisation vs. normalisation, information vs. engagement, and mobilisation vs. reinforcement). He suggests that “the Internet remains a secondary medium for a minority of Euro-citizens to find out about the election campaign, across Europe”. However his analysis of survey data also suggests that respondents’ age and gender emerge as strong impacting factors: “the Internet goes hand-in-hand with citizen-centred campaigns, where the individual takes a more active role in information gathering, in taking part to political discussion and in attending public electoral events. [...] These cyber-citizens are young males, with university education and white-collar jobs” (Lusoli 2005b, 262).

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

A growing number of contributions look at how politicians are using the Internet with survey data and content analysis of political party Web sites (Gibson and Ward 1998; Ward and Gibson 2003). Communication politics is not “as usual”, but changes seem slow to come. In his analysis of MPs’ email correspondence as a tool of political communication, Jackson (2003, 20) concludes that “there appears to be a perception that email is not a vote-winner: the seats which are likely to be more closely contested are not significantly more attuned to using email political campaigning. The only two factors which may influence whether an MP deliberately employs a relationship marketing strategy are institutional factors and Party affiliation”. An earlier study on the 2000 US election found that female candidates benefit from the total control they can exert on website presentation of their image and contents (Banwart and Kaid 2002). However, most evidence suggests that online campaigning increasingly reflects the assets and disparities of off-line campaigning, thus favouring candidates’ from bigger (and usually wealthier) parties rather than candidates in general (D’Alessio 2000). This field of analysis generally focuses on the structure of parties’ websites or, alternatively, on the content of their message, while neglecting more blurred and less directly identifiable features of vertical political communication. Lusoli’s work represents a notable exception. He deems interactivity to be a key dimension in the study of parties’ e-campaigns: “Interactivity matters. It influences participants’ perception of candidates as well as their levels of agreement with their policy positions. [...] the number of candidates offering interactivity and the range of services – e-mail feedback, online discussion boards, blogs – have expanded over time in many western democracies” (Lusoli 2005a, 155). On the whole, two limits seem to reduce our fungibility of these studies. A large majority of them represents single-country analyses focused on parties rather than on candidates’ websites. Additionally, when the focus is on candidates’ internet-based communication the set of the explanatory factors considered appear frequently limited to socio-demographic factors.

Before concluding this section we would like to spend a few words on a handful of studies analysing candidates’ e-campaign during the 2004 EP elections (Carlson and Strandberg 2005; Lusoli 2004; Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneider 2005; Ward 2005). Given our interests and objectives, these pioneering contributions clearly emerge as highly profitable for shaping our successive analytical steps. These studies relied on a common dataset collected within the framework of the Internet & Elections project. Prior to the EP election, a random sample of 100

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4 The Internet & Elections project involved researchers from eleven EU countries, old and new. They examined the online structure of political communications, the amount and nature of electoral information supplied, and the
sites was drawn from the population of sites identified in each country, stratified across producer types to ensure inclusion of a mix of website types for coding. Quotas were set as follows: 30% for candidates’ sites, 20% for parties, 10% for governmental sites, 10% for NGOs and labour unions, and the remainder distributed across other producer types. The sites have been then categorized according to a set of 24 measures (including indicators of sites’ informative level and engagement potential\(^5\)). Finally the results have been controlled for country-level factors (such as one member state’s GDP, population, index of democracy).

Looking overall at the eleven EU countries included, the authors suggest that “candidates and parties were the most dominant political actors in the EP electoral Web spheres. [...] Where the Web does play a role, that role is primarily related to provision of information related to aspects of the election and only in a minor manner do political actors of any ideological calling provide opportunities for political discussion and action” (Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneiderd 2005, 171). They also found relevant cross-country variance in the average number of websites and the emergence of a gap between Northern and Mediterranean member states: “in other countries, such as Portugal, the Web played a very minor role in the campaign; here, political campaigns are still undertaken with the tried and true tools employed in media strategies The lines of division regarding incorporation of the Web into political campaigns seem oriented along the European north-south rather than the west-east axis” (Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneiderd 2005, 171). In their analysis of the Finnish case, Carlson and Strandberg (2005, 194) found a clear prevalence of traditional one-way communication: “the candidates and the parties, on the other hand, provided a richer variety of information on their sites, providing biographies, calendars and issue positions. Beyond this, the sites to a certain degree used the virtual expanse of the web by providing speeches and audio/video files”.

Addressing the arguments touched in this section, two basic questions seem relevant for our analysis: How does the phenomenon of internet-based political communication vary both quantitatively and qualitatively? Which factors can explain this variance? In the light of this brief excursus, our research seems to have potential for innovation in two different directions. On the one hand, it represents the first cross-country attempt including a relevant number of MEPs’ websites (with an exclusive focus on the supply-side). On the other hand, it addresses new dimensions of vertical political communication, such as interactivity, multilinguism, and MEPs’ “visual identity”, which represents a complete novelty. It also embraces a more diversified array of explanatory factors (both micro-individual and macro).

### III. Identifying MEPs 2.0

1. **The dataset**

\(^5\) They included also some graphic features of the websites, such as the presence/absence of e-paraphernalia (banners and screensavers).
The present study is based on an original dataset created by the author and collected between January and February 2009. The primary aim behind the creation of the dataset was to attempt a categorization of MEPs’ personal websites according to straightforward and fixed criteria. The definition of fixed and clear criteria to evaluate MEPs’ websites represented a key challenge in the realization of this project. This was due to inevitability to deal with extremely different national traditions and, more practically, with (at least) 19 different languages.

The primary goal has been therefore to define classification criteria which were both informative enough and not subject to contextual changes. Given this structural limit, our study necessarily focused more on the “observational side of the analysis” than on a content-based assessment of the websites. Priority has been given generally to the quantitative features of the web-pages rather than on their qualitative side. To put it clear, we did not read MEPs’ posts, we counted them and we looked at the date of the last posts. The data collection process was based on a systematic and standardized codification of several characteristics of the websites.

A further caveat has been adopted in the selection process. Only MEPs’ individual sites have been coded as “personal web-pages” and therefore included in the dataset. Collective web-pages of the national delegations or MEPs’ personal sections in the parties’ official websites have been therefore systematically excluded. This further distinction, we suppose, grants a degree of personal involvement of the MEPs in the management of their websites. All the EU Member States (with the exclusion of Romania and Bulgaria) have been included in the analysis. On the whole, a sample of 422 randomly-selected MEPs (more than 57% of the total) has been controlled and 309 personal web-pages have been categorized.

2. The dependent variables: operationalization and coding

The first set of features included in the dataset deals with the nature of the each MEP’s website. The first and most basic factor registered is the existence of a personal webpage. The variable is dichotomous and has been coded as follows: absence (0), presence (1). A further distinction regards the type of site we are dealing with. Throughout our analysis we have found a wide range of solutions adopted: blogs, social networks, simple or complex web-pages, etc. The distinction is relevant as we suppose that the degree of complexity of the “web tool” chosen and the way the MEP decides to interact with his/her constituency or audience matters and might well affect the nature and the perception of the message conveyed. The final variable is dichotomous and tries to capture the level of sophistication and complexity of the “web tool” adopted. It has been coded as

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6 The dataset will be soon available at www.stefanobraghiroli.co.nr/dataset_meps_ws.sav.
7 For further details see Schneider and Foot, Online structure for political action: Exploring presidential campaign Web sites from the 2000 American election, Javnost – The Public 9(2) (2002), 43–60.
8 The sampling operation was conducted on the universe of MEPs and not on the universe of websites. The number of sampled MEPs per country is respectively: Austria (7), Belgium (15), Denmark (5), Finland (8), France (44), Germany (57), Greece (9), Ireland (9), Italy (34), Luxembourg (3), Netherlands (20), Portugal (14), Spain (35), Sweden (11), United Kingdom (57), Czech Republic (11), Estonia (2), Cyprus (5), Latvia (5), Lithuania (10), Hungary (15), Malta (5), Poland (24), Slovenia (4), Slovakia (11), MEPs elected in different countries (2).
follows: basic web-pages (0), sophisticated and flexible websites 2.0 and/or highly interactive internet-based platforms\(^9\) (1).

The assessment of the content displayed by MEPs’ sites has been conducted according to standardized and systematized criteria. Here the perspective of analysis adopted is twofold and a clear distinction is required. On the one hand, we looked at the degree of information provided by the websites; on the other hand, we addressed the way the information flow was conveyed. Needless to say, the nature and the intensity of the information flows represent one of the key features of our analysis. The web-pages analyzed present an extremely high degree of variance. For this reason, straightforward criteria of classification seem highly required. The variable “Information” is ordinal and coded as follows: limited information (1), somewhat informative (2), very informative (3). Accordingly, web-pages providing only personal information (CV, political career, publications, etc.) were classified as “low informative”. Those providing details concerning the MEPs’ political activity (speeches, proposals, article, press releases, etc.) and sporadic posts and messages to the audience were classified as “somewhat informative”. Finally, those providing a deep and regular coverage of the MEPs’ activity (written documents, as above, but also video clips and audio files) and regular and frequent communication with the constituency were classified as “very informative”.

Unlike most of the previous works, we included a specific dimension addressing websites’ interactivity. More specifically, we observed whether, and to what extent, the flow of information is unidirectional or bi-directional. Our aim here is to assess the level of participation granted to the users and the concrete possibility for them to provide some kind of feedback. We consider this an extremely relevant parameter in our assessment, as it defines the purpose of the “web tool”. The difference is whether it is thought just to inform the users (the constituency) or to establish some kind of participatory dialogue with them. The latter, in our opinion, should imply higher accountability. It also implies a change in users’ perspectives, which are no longer passive readers but active or semi-active contributors. To look at the level of interactivity we adopted a similar ranking procedure. The variable “interactivity” is ordinal and coded as follows: little interaction (1), somewhat interactive (2), very interactive (3). Accordingly, web-pages providing only contact details (phone, email address, office address) were classified as “little interaction”. Those providing the possibility to post direct comments to the articles were classified as “somewhat interactive”. Finally, those websites containing also structured platforms for collective discussion (i.e. web-fora or chat-rooms) and/or links to highly interactive social networks (i.e. MySpace or Facebook) were classified as “very interactive”.

One final variable concerning the informative nature of the websites concerns the update process. This variable, in our opinion, represents an indicator of one MEP’s degree of present involvement in the management of his/her website and his/her present interest (and electoral profit) in using an internet-based communication tool. In other words, it might well be that one website appears highly informative and interactive, but, when looking at the update, we discover that the last posts

\[^9\text{Such as the most common social networks (i.e. Facebook or MySpace).}\]
date back to one year ago. The variable “update” is dichotomous and has been coded as follows: dated (0), recently updated (1).

The variable “multilingualism” deserves a separate discourse. Given the multinational nature of the EP and the primary relevance attributed to multilingualism at EU level, we expect to find something behind one MEP’s choice to develop a website section in an idiom (usually English), other than his/her national language, as we suppose that this choice implies additional costs for the developers. This shall be true regardless of the language chosen. Sometimes languages have a strong symbolic significance, they represent distinct identities and cultures. If we just consider the case of regional languages such as Euskara in the Basque Countries or Gaelic in the Scotland, the decision to include these languages has a clear political and identitarian meaning. Beyond the minority languages, the decision to translate sections of the website in one, two, or three foreign languages might be related with one MEP’s idea of his/her constituency and has clearly to do with his/her idea of audience, seen in a more European perspective. In conclusion, this variable is supposed to register the degree of “Europeanization of communication”. The variable “multilingualism” is ordinal and coded as follows: only national language (1), national language and one foreign language (2), national language and two or more foreign languages (3). The regional and minority languages are considered apart and are coded as follows: national language and minority language (89), national language, minority language, and one or more foreign languages (99).

A final set of variables has to do with what we labelled as MEPs’ “visual identity”. The assumption behind our choice is that the symbols matter far beyond their actual meaning. We detected two basic graphic features clearly identifiable in all MEPs’ websites, regardless of the nationality and of the language: party logos and flags. As for the former, we included in our categorization national party logos and European party logos. We hypothesize that the absence/presence of one, of the other, or of both may well mirror concrete and actual implications in terms of loyalty and legitimation. Accordingly, the coding process tried to catch the absence/presence of a “European dimension”. The variable “logo” has therefore an ordinal nature and is coded as follows: European party logo (1), both European and national party logos (2), national party logo (3). The category “absence of both logos” has been assigned code 99 and has been excluded from the analysis. The second symbolic dimension addresses the absence/presence of national and/or European flags. Again, we suppose that the presence of these banners may well reflect one MEP’s vision not only in terms of loyalty and legitimation, but also in terms of identity. For this reason two variables were created. The variable “flag1” is ordinal and coded as follows: European flag (1), both European and national flags (2), national flag (3). The variable “flag2” is rather dichotomous as it only registers the absence (0) or presence of a flag (1), be it national or European.

3. Control factors

Four sets of control factors, both at macro and micro-individual level, have been considered. The first include three standard socio-demographic features: gender, age, and education. While gender is dichotomous, MEPs’ age and education are categorical ordinal and respectively range from “30-39yrs” (1) to ”70-100yrs” (5) and from “elementary school” (1) to “postgraduate education” (4).
A second group of variables addresses country-level factors. We assume that these macro aspects may well concur to explain cross country differences on the dependent variable side. All the variables belonging to this group are dichotomous. A variable “post-communist country” has been developed, in order to test the existence of an East-West divide, or better, of relevant differences in MEPs’ communication strategies between Western Europe (WE) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Another dimension tested and generally assumed to be highly revealing is “country size”. We hypothesize that MEPs’ from the so-called EU heavyweights may show different styles of communication and interaction from their colleagues from smaller member states. This supposition is based on the assumption that dissimilar national environments and cultural backgrounds may have long term effects on one’s behaviour and attitudes. In line with this assumption, two other variables are tested which are supposed to capture the effect of regional diversity across the EU: “MEPs from Mediterranean countries” and “MEPs from Scandinavian or Baltic countries” (cfr. Jankowski, Foot, Kluver and Schneider 2005).

The third dimension we control for addresses the effect of partisanship on MEPs’ internet-based communication styles. Two variables have been therefore created. The former measures the impact of MEPs being affiliated to left or right leaning parties. The MEPs have been categorized according to their European parliamentary affiliation10 and the left/right divide has been measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from Left (1) to Right (5). The second variable distinguish between the MEPs belonging to mainstream parties (1) and those attached to so-called “niche-fringe parties” (0), irrespective of their left/right orientation11.

The last set of control variables deals with electoral factors (both at macro and micro level). At individual level we considered MEPs’ past political career and their parliamentary tenure. The former is a dichotomous variable and is coded as follows: party official (1), other (0). The latter measures MEPs’ seniority in terms of number of European mandates and is of ordinal nature, ranging from “1st EP mandate” (1) to “6th EP mandate” (6). We suppose that this dimension may measure the impact of parliamentary socialization on MEPs’ communication styles. At macro level we categorized member states’ electoral institutions12. In particular, we looked at the presence of

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10 Respectively, European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL) and European Greens - European Free Alliance (EG-EFA) have been classified as left (1), the Party of European Socialists (PES) has been classified as centre-left (2), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) has been classified as centre (3), the European People's Party–European Democrats (EPP-ED) has been classified as centre-right (4), and Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), Independence/Democracy (IND/DEM), and Non-Inscrits (NI) have been classified as right (5).

11 The European People's Party–European Democrats (EPP-ED), the Party of European Socialists (PES), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and the European Greens - European Free Alliance (EG-EFA) have been categorized as mainstream parties (1), while the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL), Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), Independence/Democracy (IND/DEM), and Non-Inscrits (NI) have been classified as “niche parties” (0).

12 The EU Member states have been classified as follows: Closed lists and nation-wide constituency (Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Greece, and Spain), closed lists and more electoral districts (Italy, France, and United Kingdom), ordered lists and nation-wide constituency (Latvia, Sweden, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus, Austria, the Netherlands, and Portugal), ordered and more electoral districts (Belgium and Poland), preferences and nation-wide constituency (Lithuania, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Malta, Finland, and Denmark), single transferable vote and more electoral districts (Ireland). Member states’ electoral regulations were retrieved from the website of the EP. For further details see
“open lists” and at the level of personal involvement of the Eurocandidates in the electoral campaign vis-à-vis their “party in central office”. Both these indicators have been generally considered by the scholarly literature as highly revealing (Carey and Shugart 1995; Mitchell 2000). The variable “open lists” is dichotomous and coded as follows: absence of open lists (0), presence of open lists (1). When it comes to the assessment of candidates’ liberté de manœuvre we focused on two indicators: the size of the electoral districts and, again, the degree of openness of the electoral lists. We assume that a candidate-based system with an open ballot in local constituencies gives the candidate a high degree of independence in the conduct of the campaign, whereas a party-based system consisting of fixed lists in one nationwide constituency clearly reduces his/her role vis-à-vis the central party (Bowler and Farrel 1993; Faas 2003). As a consequence, these factors may clearly affect MEPs’ willingness to involve in internet-based communication with their constituency, in terms of perceived electoral return (cfr. Carlson and Strandberg 2005). To categorize member states’ electoral specificities we developed an index of “party centrality” ranging from “highly candidate-centred” (0) to “highly party-centred” (1).

IV. Findings

In this section we will present and discuss the results of our analysis. Given the nature of our data, we use simple statistics that, in the end, better depicts the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation. Our analysis has two successive steps. We first assess the relative weight of MEPs’ internet-based political communication in the EU member states. Then we shift our analysis to assess the nature of the relationship between our set of dependent variables and the explanatory factors proposed above. Given the relatively small number of cases and the limited number of categories in our variables, correlation seems the best statistical tool available. Its simplicity in presenting the results also makes our findings easier to read and to interpret.

1. A general picture: Cross-country variance

Figure 1 summarizes the diffusion of MEPs’ personal web-pages across the EU. On average, almost three fourth of the MEPs (73.2% of the total) have some sort of internet-based platform. However, if we shift our analysis to the country level, we can easily assess a high degree of cross-country variance as confirmed by the relatively high standard deviation (st.dev. = .443). Four national cohorts tower as the most internet-friendly. Partially confirming Lusoli’s results (2005b), all the Danish, Finnish13, Hungarian, and Slovenian MEPs included in our analysis (29 units) had indeed some sort of “web tool”. Beyond the most striking cases, it seems however quite difficult to identify consistent macro territorial dimensions behind these preliminary results. The only tendency which can be observed from this preliminary picture is that apparently the MEPs from the Mediterranean countries lag a little behind on internet-based political communication. Our supposition stems from two basic considerations. First, none of the Mediterranean national


13 According to Carlson and Strandberg (2005) the percentage of MEPs’ personal websites were 28% in 1996 and 54% in 2004.
delegations is ranked among the first ten highest scoring delegations. The Maltese cohort, whose relative weight in terms of MEPs is negligible, scores the highest rate (11th) in the group. Second, three Mediterranean countries, namely Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain present the lowest number of MEPs’ personal web-pages (cfr. Jankowski, Foot, Kluver, and Schneider 2005). In particular, the case of Spain is striking: on average, only one out of four MEPs (less than 26%) has an individual web-page.

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

![Diffusion of MEPs' personal websites in the EU member states](image)

Source: Own calculation

2. Socio-demographic factors

Like in previous studies, socio-demographic factors prove to be highly revealing. Table 1 includes the correlation coefficients between each of the three socio-demographic factors presented in the previous section and our set of dependent variables. The results show that age emerges as the most relevant explanatory factor. All the significant coefficients confirm the existence of a negative correlation between “age” and the structural features of the websites analyzed. In other words, older MEPs are less likely to have a personal webpage (Spear. $R = -0.140$) and present, on average, less informative (Spear. $R = -0.149$) and interactive (Spear. $R = -0.168$) sites which are frequently not update (Spear. $R = -0.181$). The most striking differences are found in the level of interactivity. While among the youngest cohort (30-39yrs) 54.8% of the websites present highly interactive features, among the oldest group (70-100yrs) this percentage falls to 16.7%. This denotes very different communication styles, with the new cohorts of MEPs keener to establish a bi-directional dialogue with their constituency. Looking at MEPs’ visual identity, older MEPs tend to favour European party logos to national ones (Spear. $R = -0.140$).
Beyond MEPs’ age, gender has also important implications. Interestingly, female MEPs appear more likely to have a personal website than their male colleagues (Spear. R = .134); and when they have a website, it is, on average, more sophisticated (Spear. R = .113) and more frequently update (Spear. R = .107). If we look at the raw figures, among the male MEPs, 69.3% has some sort of “web tool”, the percentage increases to 81.9% among the females MEPs.

Quite surprisingly, education does not present any significant correlation with most of the dependent variables analyzed. Multilingualism represents the only, nonetheless very relevant, exception as it positively correlates with education (Spear. R = .205). As predictable, as MEPs’ level of education increases, the number of bi-lingual or multi-lingual websites also increases. Accordingly, if we shift from “intermediate education” to “post-graduate education”, the percentage of bi-lingual websites increase from 6.7% to 21%.

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<th>Table 1. Socio-demographic factors</th>
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<td>Website</td>
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<td>Yes / No</td>
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<td>Visual identity</td>
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<td>Flag</td>
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<td>Flag (Yes / No)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multilingualism / Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of the website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

3. Country level factors

As hypothesized above, being an MEP from a Mediterranean country negatively correlates with the presence of personal web-pages (Spear. R = -.271). Quite interestingly, it also implies a wide use of flags (Spear. R = -.118). Looking at table 2, we also know that these flags are more likely to be European (Spear. R = -.199). Again, the presence of European standards might well reflect more favourable European sentiments of the Mediterranean MEPs (and of their voters). Most of the MEPs from Spain, Italy, Malta, or Portugal do not have to cope with relevant segments of Euroskeptic electorate, unlike their colleagues from other Member states, such as United Kingdom or Poland. Accordingly, 84% of the flagged “Mediterranean websites” display the sole European standard, while only 50% of the British and 23% of the Polish present the same feature. The same argument partially fits the preferences of Scandinavian or Baltic MEPs (Spear. R = .270), who, however, tend to favour – along with nationally flagged websites – the use of European party logos (Spear. R = -.162). The positive and significant coefficient displayed by post-communist countries (Spear. R = .351) confirms our belief that symbols matter both for the MEPs and for their constituency. The recently enfranchised Member states from CEE appear indeed far more jealous of their national identity and tend to witness it through a more frequent use of national symbols, favouring them vis-à-vis the European ones.
When it comes to the linguistic dimension, being an MEP from CEE, Scandinavia or Baltic countries positively correlates with the existence of multi-lingual websites (Spear. R equals respectively .363 and .196). The phenomenon of bi-lingual or multilingual websites is very relevant in post-communist countries. The percentage of bi-lingual pages among the MEPs from CEE equals 42.6%, more than 27 percentage points higher than the average of our sample (15.4%). On the contrary country size appears to be negatively correlated with multilingualism (Spear. R = -.253). MEPs from smaller member states tend to have, on average, more bi-lingual and multi-lingual websites than their colleagues from the EU heavyweight. It seems that the MEPs from the largest EU member states do not see as particularly profitable the use multilingual internet-based communication. Or, more correctly, they seem to assume that their native language is widely understood beyond their national borders\(^{14}\). The presence of only one bi-lingual website\(^{15}\) among the British seems to confirm this possibility.

When it comes to the structural features of the websites, country level factors tend to be less helpful and to produce weaker results. Specifically, what we can observe is that MEPs from CEE are less likely to use interactive platforms (Spear. R = -.156). This final observation might be an indicator of a weak dialogue between elites and voters in CEE, as suggested by the scholarly literature (Agh 1998; Braghiroli and Gherghina 2008; Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007; Lewis and Mansfeldová 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Country level factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-communist</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Website</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual identity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flag</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flag (Yes / No)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multilingualism / Audience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Features of the website</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informative level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactivity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Update</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

4. Partisan dimension

As supposed in the previous section the partisan dimension proves very revealing. When we look at MEPs’ “visual identity”, variable “left/right” is positively and significantly correlated with all the


\(^{15}\) It is noteworthy that the second language is Welsh, considered a minority language.
features considered. In other words, as we shift from “left” to “right” the average number of nationally flagged websites (Spear. R = .371) and of national party logos (Spear. R = .277) increases. To put it another way, as we shift from “left” to “right” the appeal to national identity becomes stronger and it seems to reach its peak among the MEPs from UEN and IND/DEM and the non-attached MEPs. This phenomenon is witnessed by the average number of nationally flagged websites among the right leaning MEPs. While among the left leaning MEPs 96.2% of the flagged websites display only the European flag, among the MEPs from the right the percentage falls to 33.3%. Similarly, the preference for national party logos reflects both lower attachment (and practically lower loyalty) to the European parliamentary group and may be also an indicator of the weak structuration of the latter (cfr. Hix, Noury, Roland 2006). The identitarian connotation of national symbols is also confirmed by the coefficients computed for “type of party”. The presence of both national flags and national party logos is indeed negatively and significantly correlated (Spear. R equals respectively -.216 and -.229) with being an MEP for mainstream parties. If we add that among the niche-fringe parties the flagged websites are predominantly from rightist MEPs, this seems to be in line with our interpretation.

Confirming the results of D’Alessio’s analysis (2000) of candidates’ strategies in the US elections, the mainstream bigger parties seem to rely more on new technologies than their smaller and less mainstream competitors, as reflected by the higher average number of websites (Spear. R = .142). In addition, we found that this dimension is also relevant when looking at the qualitative side of the coins. In particular, the level of update and the affiliation to a mainstream party are indeed significantly and positively correlated (Spear. R = .100). When it comes to the structural features of MEPs’ websites, we found that variable “left/right” is negatively correlated with all the parameters included in the model. As we shift from “left” to “right” the average number of sophisticated websites decreases (Spear. R = -.125), along with their informative level (Spear. R = -.112), their degree of interactivity (Spear. R = -.134), and the frequency of their update (Spear. R = -.229). To put it simply, considering that we did not notice any relevant change in the presence/absence of websites when controlling for the left-right divide, it seems that the MEPs affiliated to right wing parties are less interested in the “quality” of internet based communication; however this “more conservative attitude” in the use of internet-based communication does not reduce their chances to have a personal webpage (Spear. R = -.007).

As a final point, we did not find any significant correlation between the two dimensions of partisanship and multilingualism.

Table 3. Partisan dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Left-right divide</th>
<th>Type of party (mainstream / niche)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.142**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logos</td>
<td>.227**</td>
<td>-.229**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag</td>
<td>.371**</td>
<td>-.216*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag (Yes / No)</td>
<td>.143**</td>
<td>-.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingualism / Audience</td>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of the website</td>
<td>Type of website</td>
<td>-.125*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative level</td>
<td>-.112*</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **Micro/macro electoral factors**

This final part of our analysis addresses the impact of electoral dynamics on MEPs internet-based communication. We will first discuss the role of micro-level (individual) factors and we will then move on to examine country-level factors. Being a first timer rather than a senior MEP seems to make the difference both in the features displayed by MEPs’ websites and in their attitudes towards multi-lingual communication (Spear. R = -.245). As MEPs’ number of mandates increases, the average number of sophisticated and highly informative (Spear. R equals respectively -.120 and -.108) websites decreases. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that more EP mandates generally mean older cohorts of MEPs\(^{16}\). However, if we control for MEPs’ age, while the intensity of the relationship decreases, the orientation of the coefficients (computed for *multilinguism* and *informative level*) does not change and the gap seems to persist. On the contrary, this operation severely reduces the reliability of *tenure* as a predictor of sites’ sophistication, as the orientation of the correlation seems to vary according to the MEPs’ age. MEPs’ previous career is far less helpful in this respect and seems to produce weaker results. Quite surprisingly, a previous political career negatively correlates with variable multilinguism (Spear. R = -.098), even though the strength of the correlation seems quite weak.

When it comes to country-level electoral factors, we can assess a difference in the explanatory power between the two macro indicators adopted. While variable “open lists” performs quite poorly in predicting the presence/absence of MEPs’ individual websites (Spear. R = .085), our index of “party centrality” seems to produce interesting results. The presence of party-centred systems negatively and significantly correlates with the presence of personal websites (Spear. R = -.107). This seems to confirm our initial intuition that systems with open ballots in local constituencies tend to favour candidates’ electoral activism vis-à-vis the central parties and that higher activism implies higher consideration for the constituency (as reflected by the higher average number of websites). Similarly, looking at the demand-side of the relationship, Lusoli (2005b, 250) argue that “one may expect that citizens would be more willing to gather information where they could choose among candidates, as they can do with open electoral lists and non-blocked lists, rather than where candidates were selected a priori by the parties”. Even controlling for other country-level factors (such as country size) the coefficients do not change their orientation and the results do not vary significantly. Interestingly, the presence of candidate-centred systems is not related to other “qualitative” features included in our model (i.e. websites’ interactive level, Spear. R = -.020).

**Table 4. Individual and country-level electoral factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Previous career</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Open lists</th>
<th>Electoral institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactivity</strong></td>
<td>-.134**</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Update</strong></td>
<td>-.229**</td>
<td>.100*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{16}\) The two factors (age and tenure) are indeed positively and significantly correlated (Spear. R = .204**).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Yes / No</th>
<th>0.017</th>
<th>0.026</th>
<th>0.085*</th>
<th>0.107**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multilingualism / Audience Languages</td>
<td>-0.098*</td>
<td>-0.245**</td>
<td>0.099*</td>
<td>0.118*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of the website Type of website</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>-0.120*</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative level</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>-0.108*</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update</td>
<td>-0.100*</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coefficients in columns are Spear. R. * Correlation is significant at .05 level; ** Correlation is significant at .001 level.

V. Conclusions

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

In spite of the general neglect from the media, we can see this as a way to bypass the traditional channels of information, usually weak at European level, and to establish a less filtered and more direct dialogue with the sectors of the society which are familiar with the web (Lusoli 2005). In a recent interview an Italian MEP declared that “there is a structural limit which day after day puts in danger and weakens our inclusive efforts. To put it simply, 90% of our voters have no idea of our role in Brussels. They do not know what we do and what we deal with”17. Another added that “on the whole, there is no connection at all. For most of the voters Europe doesn’t matter that much; they barely realize what the European elections are. For this reason, it is also difficult to establish such a connection. Nobody invites us to discuss and to present Europe at home”18. For MEPs 2.0 the use of sophisticated and interactive tools may represent a practical way to escape this vicious circle and to establish and maintain a preferential (and relatively low-cost) link with their constituency, despite the alleged 2nd order nature of the EP politics.

Our preliminary figures show that, while almost three fourth of the MEPs have some sort of personal “web tools” (e-MEPs), when it comes to more qualitative aspects the picture becomes blurred. Our analysis checked whether specific dimensions can explain these differences. After testing a wide range of indicators, we observed that MEPs’ attitudes towards internet-based communication are influenced by a number of factors. Most of them seem to act at individual

17 Author’s interview an Italian MEP, 28 May 2008.
18 Author’s interview an Italian MEP, 27 May 2008.
level (such as age, gender, education or MEPs’ parliamentary tenure or previous profession); however also macro and country-level factors proved to have a relevant impact. Our analysis shows that, not only the existence of different internet-based communication styles, but also the nature of vertical communication between elites and voters, are influenced by the national setting in which the MEPs act. Unlike Jankowski et alii (2005) both the territorial dimension considered (North-South and East-West) were found to be play a role, even though in different aspects. Testing the relevance of specific territorial dimensions, we found, for instance, that MEPs from Southern European or Mediterranean countries tend, on average, to rely less on internet-based communication, whereas those from CEE seem to embrace a more traditional vision of e-politics, being their websites relatively less interactive and sophisticated. Our belief is that the analysis of these differences may contribute concretely to shed light on the features of vertical communication between elites and voters. One of the most intriguing results produced by our analysis was the detection of a positive correlation between the existence of candidate-centred electoral systems and presence of MEPs’ individual websites. When this is the case, it seems more profitable for MEPs to have a personal website as it tends to facilitate the maximization of their electoral efforts. It seems not a coincidence that, on the other hand, most of the major parties in the systems characterized by higher party centrality tend to favour collective portals of the national delegations at the expense of MEPs’ individual websites. To summarize, we discovered that not only the “quality” of the message is influenced by the individual characteristics of the messenger, but also by his/her background and by the features of the environment in which he/she operates and competes to make his/her message more likely of being heard.

A discourse apart can be done with respect to MEPs’ visual identity. Our analysis showed that symbols matter and that, on the whole, their presence or absence as well as their connotation is far from being random. In particular we looked at two graphical features of MEPs’ websites: their party logos and the flags. The presence/absence of these features as well as their content seems to vary according to identifiable factors (such as their partisan affiliation and their country of origin). These symbols also appear to reflect MEPs’ attitudes in terms of identity, self-identification, and loyalty. We found, for instance, that MEPs from recently enfranchised CEE Member states tend to systematically favour national symbols to European ones. Likewise, as we shift from “left” to “right” the appeal to national identity becomes stronger as witnessed by the average increase of nationally flagged websites among the right leaning MEPs.

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

Note of caution

In case of high and significant correlation between two independent variables included in the model, all the coefficients presented in the study (Spearman’s R) were controlled accordingly. In all the cases discussed in the paper the orientation of the original correlation did not change, while presenting satisfactory levels of significance, unless explicitly mentioned in the text.
References


