

# Members of the European Parliament Online:

The Use of Social Media in  
Political Marketing

Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic





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## Executive summary

The appearance of political marketing and campaigning on social media is a relatively new phenomenon, which was first introduced in the US before spreading to Europe. The importance of online political marketing can be seen in, among other factors, the major advantages offered by the Internet—namely the rapid transmission of information and the possibilities for large numbers of people to connect. This is especially significant for politics on the EU level, which embraces a body of 375 million voters. Despite the fact that not everyone uses the Internet in Europe, the percentage of those who do is considered to be high enough for its application in politics. The goal of this paper is to examine the connection between European politics, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the use of social media, and to give suggestions on how the use of social media in political marketing could be further advanced.

This paper starts with an explanation of what political marketing is and how it is used in politics. It explains the relevance of the theme of this paper, in the context of the lack of political legitimacy in the European Union and the low turnout in the European Parliament (EP) elections, and discusses the possible reasons for these. The paper then describes the growth of the use of the Internet, its influence on everyday life and its connection to politics.

The paper then describes European Parliament elections and the fall in voter turnout (not only in the EU, but also at the national level). It then focuses on the growing use of the Internet in society – at the first place in electoral campaigns, although we have seen lately its application in social movements (e.g. the Middle Eastern and North African revolutions, political protests, the anti-ACTA campaign, the political riots in the UK, etc.).

The paper goes on to analyse interviews that were conducted with MEPs, their political advisors and campaign managers. The analysis of the interviews reveals politicians' perceptions of how important social media are for European politics today and shows how social media are used in political advertising in Europe. It explores their attitudes towards the use and role of social media in campaigning compared with traditional media. The paper then looks at communication between politicians and citizens, and the interaction and mobilisation offered by the relatively new and 'interactive' Web 2.0.<sup>1</sup> It also gives some views on how the campaign for the 2014 European Parliament elections will be developed. It then goes on to explain the changes that online communication brings to electoral campaigns and the awareness of politicians regarding its impact.

The conclusions suggest that, although present on the main social media websites (such as Facebook and Twitter), politicians and campaign managers in Europe need to further develop their use of this type of communication in order to find the right approach for European citizens. While campaign managers and advisors are mostly aware of the advantages the Internet brings to the field of political advertising, understanding of the phenomenon needs to be further developed among politicians.

The paper recommends greater use of social media for the creation of stronger bonds between politicians and citizens in Europe, which could improve electoral participation and consequently contribute to overcoming citizens' apathy and the lack of democracy at the EU level. Social media sites could be used to mobilise a larger number of EU citizens to vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Web 2.0' is the name of the new generation of Internet design that includes interactive elements which allow users to participate in the creation of content ('user-generated content'). Its use in political communication has grown exponentially since 2008.

## Introduction

In a contemporary democratic society, one of the basic tasks of a politician is to communicate with the electorate. This type of communication affects the political process. Politicians use communication and marketing tools to influence and build their own image, publicity and reputation. Through doing this, they try to make the larger part of the public think in the same way they do.<sup>2</sup>

Political marketing during a campaign also has a strategic dimension, because it establishes a campaign line and target groups, images and themes. Major advances in political marketing took place during the twentieth century, flourishing with the appearance of television as a mass medium in the 1960s.

Over the last couple of decades, the field of political marketing has had the chance to spread to a new medium, the Internet. The Internet was first used in an electoral campaign during the 1996 US presidential elections. The candidates created static web pages that gave details about themselves and their campaigns. Since then, major changes have taken place. The majority of Western states have been affected by the use of social media in electoral campaigns.

The creation of Web 2.0 offered new opportunities for politicians to communicate on social media, which are fundamentally entertainment websites. Social media have also contributed to the blossoming of personalisation among politicians. The political discussions that take place on social media are intended to promote the greater participation of citizens. Common to all these aspects is the specific way of

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<sup>2</sup>D. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication* (London: Sage, 2006).

approaching the audience, which consists mostly of young adults, in order to make them aware of and involve them in the political process.

Political marketing has changed over time with the development of new techniques and media through which politicians can be promoted. We currently live in an era of media abundance, which leads to selective exposure of the content to the audience. As an MEP's political advisor stressed,

Communications today are much more complicated than they were 800 years ago when you went to church to find out what was happening. Now people receive lots of information every day, everywhere. So you have to repeat a message a lot, many times, before people will actually react. Thus, you have to be all over the media—the radio, the TV, everything—and you can't avoid email and social media. They are necessary, as they are all part of a huge picture where everything is important. You cannot only be on Facebook, or only on Twitter.<sup>3</sup>

The multiplication of political agendas and cyber-politics, and the fragmentation of the audience have changed the reception of political messages, and consequently have reduced the influence of politics and the media.<sup>4</sup> Although the relationship between 'online' and 'offline' campaigns has been examined since the establishment of the Internet, there is still a division between those scholars and experts who argue that the Internet has not brought anything new to the relationship between political actors and citizens<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on this third age of political marketing, see J. G. Blumler and D. Kavanagh, 'The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features', *Political Communication* 16/3 (1999), 209–30.

those who think that the Internet has brought about certain changes.<sup>6</sup> These changes are seen, in the first place, as an adjustment of Internet content to better meet citizens' needs, and this could thus have an impact on political participation.

With the lack of political legitimacy at the EU level, it is important and interesting to investigate the presence and discourse of EU political actors on social media sites, predominantly Facebook and Twitter, as well as on their blogs, which are a form of social media now commonly used in party politics. That is why, for the purpose of this study, fifteen interviews have been conducted with MEPs, their political advisors and campaign managers, mostly from the European People's Party, in the period January-June 2012. All the interviews were confidential and therefore the names of the interviewees have been withheld from this paper.

## Political legitimacy and the European Parliament

During the 1990s, the opacity of the decision-making processes in the EU institutions once again raised the question of the democratic deficit.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the EU has been trying to increase levels of accountability and legitimacy through new treaties, and also by establishing

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<sup>5</sup>S. Bentivegna, 'Rethinking Politics in the World of ICTs', *European Journal of Communication* 21/3 (2006), 331–43.

<sup>6</sup>P. N. Howard and S. Jones, *Society Online: The Internet in Context* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

<sup>7</sup>The term 'democratic deficit' was first used during the 1970s in relation to the European Parliament, whose members were not directly elected until 1979.

and applying different policies.<sup>8</sup> One of these policies was the European Commission's information and communication technologies policy, which focused on the availability of and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). In addition to the European Commission's initiative, the European Parliament started to promote the use of ICTs in the 2000s. The EU restructured its website in 2009, thus providing more, and more transparent, information to citizens via the Internet.

In 2009 the elections to the European Parliament—the only directly elected multinational assembly in the world—embraced an electorate of 375 million (which will be further enlarged in 2014 after the accession of Croatia), making them the biggest transnational elections in history. Given that, in general, elections supply legitimacy and accountability to every representative democracy, the elections to the European Parliament should represent one of the key events in European democratic life. Furthermore, MEPs are the only European representatives directly elected by citizens.

Since the first direct elections in 1979, there has been a gradual fall in participation (Figure 1). The turnout at the 2009 elections was just 43%. Turnout has fallen 5–20% in those (nine) countries that participated in the elections in both 1979 and 2009 (with the exception of Belgium, Luxembourg<sup>9</sup> and the UK, where turnout has not changed much, and Denmark,<sup>10</sup> where it has risen by 12%). There is generally a

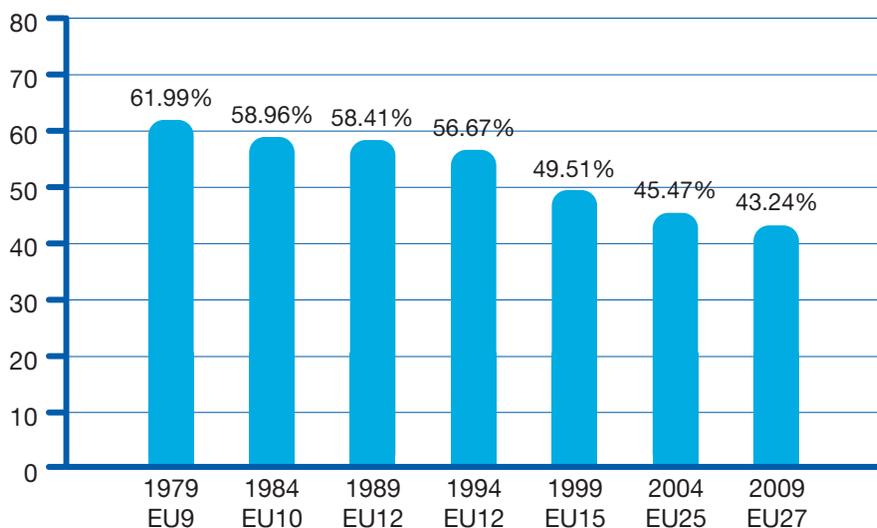
<sup>8</sup> The most well-known and significant policies in the last decade were the Lisbon Agenda, with its eEurope and i2010 strategies, and the Digital Agenda that was implemented in 2010.

<sup>9</sup> It should be borne in mind that voting is compulsory in Belgium and Luxembourg.

<sup>10</sup> Denmark is one of the rare European and Scandinavian countries where there has not been a drop in turnout in national elections either. This phenomenon is explained by the mobilisation of weak groups and the highly competitive political environment (J. Elklit, P. Svensson and L. Togeby, 'Why Is Voter Turnout Not Declining in Denmark?' Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (Washington DC, 1–4 September 2005)).

low participation rate (under 50%) in the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2008. However, it should also be noted that if comparing the 2004 elections with those of 2009, a slowdown in the fall in turnout can be observed (the biggest fall—7%—was recorded between the elections in 1994 and 1999, with that between 1999 and 2004 the second largest at 4%). It is difficult to establish the reasons for such a large fall, but the majority of scholars and practitioners argue that a lack of confidence in politicians in general, and a lack of interest in and knowledge of the European Union play a part: ‘People will not vote because, first, the political class, whether it is national or European, is generally discredited, and second, because people do not understand European affairs—they seem distant to them and they do not know their MEPs.’<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 Turnout at the European Parliament elections (1979–2009)



Source: ‘European Parliament, About Parliament’, *Website of the European Parliament*, accessed at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/turnout\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/turnout_en.html) on 25 January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 1 March 2012.

Since the turnout for the EP elections is continually falling, many political scientists and observers agree that there is a lack of democratic legitimacy in the European Union today<sup>12</sup> and that the importance of the elections is diminishing. However, I think that these elections are still relevant and important because of their dual European and national character.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, several steps have been taken in order to increase voter participation which will lead to increased legitimacy as well. One of them is a change in the communication strategy.

## A change in the communication strategy

The communication strategy for the 2009 European Parliament elections differed greatly from that of the 2004 elections. The main point of change was the introduction of the use of the Internet. Broader Internet use in political marketing, beyond websites for the official candidates, emerged in 2005, and was, to a great extent, popularised by the 2008 US electoral campaign. This contributed to the use of social media in political and electoral campaigns throughout Europe. It also had an impact on the creation of a new communication strategy at the EU level. In 2009, in addition to the official website, the European Parliament created profiles on five social media sites in order to create a feeling of being closer to the citizens. This was also the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, D. Ward, 'The Democratic Deficit and European Union Communication Policy. An Evaluation of the Commission's Approach to Broadcasting', *Javnost – The Public* 8/1 (2001), 75–94.

<sup>13</sup> J. Stromback, M. Maier and L. L. Kaid, 'Political Communication and Election Campaigns for the European Parliament', in M. Maier, J. Stromback and L. L. Kaid (eds.), *Political Communication in European Parliamentary Elections* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 3–16.

case for the political parties and candidates in the 2009 electoral campaign. In this way, many parliamentarians saw the strength and power of the Internet as a new medium that could be used for political promotion. One interviewee noted that, 'If it is used in a proper way, Facebook can be an instrument of approach because it explains — it allows dialogue with citizens.'<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, Facebook can have an impact on the familiarity of European citizens with the EU and their elected representatives. Yet, not all MEPs are using its full potential; many do not plan to start using services such as Twitter.<sup>15</sup> Just three years ago, one-third of MEPs did not know of the existence of online campaigning tools and only 10% were aware of their effectiveness.<sup>16</sup> The dominant feeling, when it comes to Europe, is that, while politicians are concentrating on the traditional tools of political marketing with which they are more familiar, online tools will remain slightly out of view.

However, the use of online tools is seen as a possible positive advancement in electoral campaigning that could help to increase turnout, which is currently in decline in many liberal democracies.<sup>17</sup> The Internet's potential to attract citizens and widen participation is accepted on the condition that citizens participate in a two-way conversation with politicians. Researchers as well as practitioners agree on this. On the other hand, if citizens do not get the impression that what they say is valued and listened to, the online strategy will not be very successful. However, it is questionable how much time politicians can devote to interacting with their electorate.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with an MEP on 1 March 2012.

<sup>15</sup> According to the 2009 Fleishman-Hillard survey, 62% of MEPs either did not know what Twitter was or did not have plans to use it.

<sup>16</sup> Fleishman-Hillard, *European Parliament Digital Trends Survey*, 2009, accessed at <http://www.epdigitaltrends.eu/> on 15 July 2010.

<sup>17</sup> A. Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

## The Internet in everyday life

The appearance of new communication technologies in the 1990s, during the so-called global crisis of democracy, represented a new chapter, and a challenge to the development of society and the notion of democracy, as well as to the totality of human communication praxis.

The main innovation the Internet brought to the mediascape was the ability to transfer all types of data around the world very quickly, in other words, at the maximal speed of distribution, which has led to an abundance of information available to anyone in the world who is interested in it, if he or she is online. The Internet also allows anything and anyone in the world to be connected as a result of 'being online'. It offers a large space for presentation at a lower price of production than other media. The de-territorialisation of communication, and greater access to and exchange of information through the Internet, as well as the improved transparency of the political process itself, have brought positive changes to democracy. This is especially true of countries living under dictatorships, where it is almost impossible to receive accurate information through official media channels.<sup>18</sup> Other positive characteristics of the new information technologies are the creation of synergies and convergence, the multimedia format, the possibility of having hyperlinks leading to the primary sources of information, and the ability to receive real-time information.

Among communication and media scholars, a computer network is considered a completely new and different medium. While a television network consists of an emitter

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the protests in Burma broadcast online, the Arab Spring revolutions, etc.

and multiple homogenous recipients, a computer network consists of an interconnected system of heterogeneous processors which can be, at the same time, both emitters and receivers. An electronic message can simultaneously be a subject of interpersonal communication between an emitter and a recipient, or between two recipients, or a mass communication. This means that the Internet can be used for both private and public communication, as well as for targeting both mass and specialist audiences. This is significant for its application in political marketing.

The first generation of the Internet, Web 1.0, consisted of the World Wide Web (network), electronic mail, discussion forums and so forth. The appearance of Web 2.0, however, brought with it the introduction of social networking sites, wikis and blogs.

These new ICTs have caused considerable changes to communication among people in both their professional and personal lives, that is, in both public and private spaces. The Internet has become an integral part of everyday life in terms of people's habitual use of it.<sup>19</sup> Today, in countries with high penetration of the Internet in daily life, it is used 24 hours a day for many purposes, from leisure and entertainment to consultation and information, and from work and study to communication. Nevertheless, the correlation between Internet users and the technology itself is seen as a two-fold process. While 'users shape technology by way of their everyday living with it . . . technology also alters the structure of users' everyday life worlds'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Drawing upon de Certeau's (1980) conceptualisation of everyday life, we can make assumptions about people's habits (M. Franklin, *Postcolonial Politics, the Internet, and Everyday Life. Pacific Traversals Online* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004)).

<sup>20</sup> M. Bakardjieva, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* (London: Sage, 2005), 38.

The most significant improvement of the Internet over traditional media was the transformation of traditional one-to-many or one-to-one flows of communication to those of many-to-many (e.g. Usenet, peer-to-peer networks) and many-to-one (e.g. feedback forms, online polls), which was made possible with technological advancements and the appearance of Web 2.0. This marked the beginning of a new era of Internet interactivity and created the foundation for the existence of social media websites. Therefore, through the Internet, it is possible to have a direct reciprocal connection in message exchange between an indefinite number of consumers. This is used by politicians, among others, to make closer contact with their electors, enabling them to pay greater attention to their needs and opinions.

When we talk about the application of the Internet in different social areas, we should also mention Internet penetration and bear in mind that these campaigns do not suit the entire EU electorate. According to Internet World Stats, 71.5% of EU citizens use the Internet (compared to 77.3% in the US). This percentage varies between states. While in Romania it is just 39.2%, in Sweden it equals 92.9%.<sup>21</sup> It should also be noted that the proportion of the population using the Internet significantly increased in the period 2000–8 (on average it increased by 214%, but in countries such as Romania and Lithuania it increased by more than 800%). This speaks in favour of the argument regarding the diminishing gap in digital inequality.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, many strategies have been created in order to include the digitally excluded, such as various initiatives focused on ‘digital inclusion’, financed and/or initiated by the European Commission.

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<sup>21</sup> Internet World Stats, ‘Internet Penetration in the EU’, 2012, accessed at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm> on 4 July 2012.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Digital inequality’ or the ‘digital divide’ are terms used to define the gap between those who do not have access to digital technologies and the Internet and those who do, and is usually presented as the percentage of the population that has access.

However, the institutions should foster the actual use of new technologies and citizens' engagement with them, instead of simply supporting them.

When it comes to Internet users in Europe, in a study carried out in 2005 in the UK, broadly speaking the socio-political profile of an Internet user was 'male, younger, higher social grade, working full-time and with higher levels of formal education'.<sup>23</sup> Taking into consideration the fact that younger people with higher levels of formal education are those who abstain in the European Parliament elections, a well-planned online electoral strategy targeting young adults should be able to help politicians win their votes. In this way, the Internet could help to foster informed, participative and deliberative potential voters, which would indirectly have a positive impact on democracy in general.<sup>24</sup>

Computers and the Internet have quickly found applications in politics, including in political marketing, and the evidence for this is undeniable. Their utility in reaching out to voters in election campaigns has grown and expanded since the 1990s, both in Europe and in North America, particularly in the US. These activities continue to proliferate in the social media of the current period.

The abolition of restrictions regarding access to and the exchange of information<sup>25</sup> is often seen as the Internet's major contribution towards the development of (e)democracy. In the era of the Internet, citizens have gained greater autonomy regarding media because of the abundance of information and the multiplication of communication channels.

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<sup>23</sup> W. Lusoli, S. Ward and R. Gibson, '(Re)connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet', *Parliamentary Affairs* 59/1 (2006), 39.

<sup>24</sup> S. Bentivegna, 'Rethinking Politics in the World of ICTs', *European Journal of Communication* 21/3 (2006), 331–43.

<sup>25</sup> People have never before had the ability to access so much information as in the era of the Internet.

The Internet has influenced the acceleration of information flow and the availability of political information for a significant proportion of the audience. Consequently, it has contributed to increasing professionalisation, pluralism and citizen involvement, which are seen as the most important added values.<sup>26</sup>

## Politics online

When the first social media site appeared, its goal was to link the students on a university campus so that they could exchange information. This application soon spread to linking (long-lost) friends and family, and was later extended to business and politics. Today social media are considered to be the marketing strategy *du jour* for corporations and organisations in the digitalised world. In a study that investigated the strategies of companies, government institutions and non-profit organisations,<sup>27</sup> it was revealed that the professional role of social media is increasing, with an average of seven social media sites being utilised by each public relations department. Their daily use for professional purposes increases staff workloads and the time allocated to updating them.

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<sup>26</sup> J. G. Blumler and D. Kavanagh, 'The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features', *Political Communication* 16/3 (1999), 209–30; L. Vesnic-Alujevic, *The Role of Internet in Political Communication: A Case Study of the European Parliament Elections* (Ghent: University Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> For more, see A. Zerfass, 'Social Media Governance 2011: Expertise, Structures and Strategies of Companies, Governmental Institutions and Non-Profit Organizations Communicating on the Social Web', *Ffpr.de*, 2011, accessed at [http://www.ffpr.de/de/news/studien/social\\_media\\_governance\\_2011\\_en.html#c5655](http://www.ffpr.de/de/news/studien/social_media_governance_2011_en.html#c5655) on 15 October 2011.

Social media have quickly been adopted by policymakers as well. To have a presence on social media, politicians need to have celebrity appeal in order to be successful and to be able to form a 'friendship' with the wider public. While creating a profile itself is indispensable, being active on the media is crucial to success.

The popularity of social media is also linked to the possibility they offer of targeting specific audiences. Different advertisements can be created for different demographic groups. This sort of targeting first took place in the US, which has taken the lead in both political advertising and the use of social media. As part of a good social media campaign in the US, there will be adverts for, for instance, those who have just turned 18, those working in local government, Native Americans, immigrants, senior citizens and so on. These groups will be created on the basis of the Facebook followers of a local radio station or for citizens who have indicated an interest in a particular matter (e.g. environmental issues). The adverts are created in a way that means that they speak to these targeted groups of people. However, it is interesting to note that throughout the interviews, none of the MEPs mentioned targeting any socio-demographic group in particular. In contrast to their colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic, their target group is social media multipliers only.

In addition to the use of social media for electoral campaign purposes, citizens use them as a grass-roots means to better organise and promote their own interests. The first part of 2012 was marked in Europe by debates in different EU institutions (in the first place the EP) over the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA). A large number of EU citizens opposed the Agreement by organising protests in more than 200 cities throughout Europe. These protests were coordinated through the Internet. What is important to acknowledge is that ACTA proved that what is discussed

among citizens on social media can have an influence on policymaking—although it was the MEPs who voted on it, we can say that they were directly influenced by the electorate, by listening to their views which were mostly expressed through the Internet.

The penetration of the Internet into people's daily lives<sup>28</sup> has brought about changes to the practices of political leaders in Europe. In addition to affecting their electorate and the process of electoral campaigning through the new methods of media communication, politicians are also affected by the same technologies in the sense that their communication and information habits and behaviours have changed. This is due to the ability to more rapidly gather, store and share large amounts of information; network with politicians, party members and supporters; and message<sup>29</sup> citizens and others.

Over a relatively short period, social media have entered the mainstream of political marketing. They are considered to be 'absolutely indispensable',<sup>30</sup> as they represent a very good way of communicating directly with a large audience. The ability to establish personal connections with voters is the huge advantage of social media, but at the same time this makes individuals more responsible for their online presence and activities. Two further advantages social media offer are greater freedom of expression and greater contact time than exist in traditional media: 'In addition to the direct impact on lots of people, the advantage of social media is, above all, the freedom from time constraints, which differs from other media we use—TV, video, press conferences and so on. We are freer to express ourselves and we can reply more sincerely to people.'<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, it is often assumed, among both

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<sup>28</sup> M. Bakardjieva, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Sending text messages to mobile phones and emails via the Internet.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 1 March 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with an MEP on 1 March 2012.

academics and practitioners, that the key to success on social media is that a person (whether politician, celebrity or other persona) be interesting, relevant and credible.

Experts often provide tips on using social media in politics. For instance, Pearson<sup>32</sup> claims that it is not enough to create a Facebook page, it must also be promoted. Equally, instead of inserting an icon into a television advert or print media, the entire website address should be provided, or else citizens may not be able to find the website. It is also important to look at Facebook insights and statistical information, such as demographics, time of posting, number of people reached, number of interactions and number of views, because this information can serve to further develop the electoral campaign. Although European politicians often post 'tweets', press releases and official statements on Facebook, this is not considered to be a good tactic, because every medium is different and requires a different style that cannot be achieved through copying the information in its original form.

What is particularly significant about online campaigning is not only the possibility for politicians to interact with citizens, especially their supporters, but at the same time for citizens to interact with each other. Consequently, online participation helps to better connect people with similar beliefs and can strengthen the bonds between them. This may help politicians to mobilise their own voters, but a direct causal relationship between the use of social media and electoral gains has not yet been proven (despite numerous studies related to the influence of online campaigning on the 2008 US electoral results).

As already mentioned, all the innovations in (political) advertising tend to come from the US and this can also be said of the application of social media in electoral campaigns.

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<sup>32</sup> T. Pearson, '10 Common Mistakes Political Campaigns Make with Facebook Pages', *NewMediaCampaigns.com*, 2012, accessed at <http://www.newmediacampaigns.com/page/10-common-mistakes-political-campaigns-make-with-facebook> on 14 April 2012.

Their use was first noted during Howard Dean's campaign in 2004. At that time, Dean was running for the Democratic presidential nomination:

The Internet community is wondering what its place in the world of politics is. Along comes this campaign to take back the country for ordinary human beings, and the best way you can do that is through the Net. We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech.<sup>33</sup>

This was one of the first success stories on the use of the Internet in electoral campaigning. Thanks to one of the first social network portals, Dean, the governor of a small American state, became the most successful primary fundraiser in the Democratic Party and was able to establish a large network of volunteers. His example was followed by Barack Obama's presidential campaign, and this stopped big donors and economic lobbies from controlling the electoral campaign.

The first well-known and successful example of a more strategic use of social media for political advertising purposes, and one which has already been studied by many political and communication scientists and experts, was Barack Obama's 2008 online campaign. After more than 10 years of Internet use, online campaigning had evolved and become more refined. As the campaign began after the appearance of Web 2.0, that is, the interactive Internet, it was not shaped in the way that it would have been for a simple broadcast medium. In order to catch the attention of

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<sup>33</sup> G. Wolf, 'How the Internet Invented Howard Dean', *Wired* 12/1 (2004).

undecided and uninvolved voters, social media platforms were used as communication and participation tools, thus engaging citizens through them. The *my.barackobama.com* platform gathered a great number of supporters and helped to mobilise traditionally marginalised social groups.<sup>34</sup> It also contributed to increasing the turnout by engaging young adults and getting their support. The participants on his online platform communicated both vertically (by sending fundraising reminders, dates of gatherings, etc. to activists) and horizontally (between activists), which was an innovation that provided activists with the opportunity to interact and exchange opinions. The Republican National Committee and John McCain, the Republican candidate, also tried to build a campaign on social media. However, their supporters did not use social media to the extent that Obama's did and therefore this did not have as great an influence on the campaign. Online tools were also included rather late on in their campaign.

Despite the success of online campaigns in the 2008 US electoral campaign, it is arguable how many of those opportunities are being used by political actors around the world. On the EU level, social media have been used since the campaign for the 2009 EP elections. Through the use of different websites, MEPs have tried to influence the electorate by offering more information about their work and opinions and by mobilising supporters. Since 2009, the use of social media has developed and become more systematic among MEPs. However, many of them argue that traditional media are still the most important. The Internet is considered as another platform that can contribute to an electoral campaign and thus as a space that 'must be occupied', but not as a real competitor to media such as television.

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<sup>34</sup> S. Braghiroli, 'Politicians Online. MEP Communication Strategies in the Internet Era', *European Policy Institutes Network Working Paper* 29 (2010).

In the field of political marketing, there are still different opinions regarding the significance of *online* political marketing and its inclusion in the field. However, since it began to be used two decades ago, the Internet has obtained a permanent place on the research agendas of both communication and political scientists and is becoming a mainstream topic for political marketing studies. The number of studies on the topic confirms its attractiveness and use in politics for both electoral campaigns and continuous marketing. In addition to the inclusion of the Internet in political marketing in democratic countries around the world, its application also brings about the possibility of challenging established governments through the ad hoc mobilisation of citizens and the organisation of grass-roots movements through social media, especially in non-democratic countries.<sup>35</sup> One example of this is the street protests in Myanmar in 2007, when, despite the low penetration of the Internet in the country, the citizens were mobilised against Myanmar's junta through social media, before YouTube (citizens uploaded the videos they took on the streets), Facebook, forums and blogs were shut down by the government. As well as the potential for mobilisation, the Internet served to show a global audience the situation, which was impossible to do through official press releases.<sup>36</sup> Some more recent examples are the 'Arab Spring' revolutions, where, despite the still-present digital divide in those countries (only 5–34% of the population have Internet access), social media have played a significant role in gathering protestors and disseminating information (together with traditional media), free from state censorship.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> P. Dahlgren, 'Internet, Public Spheres and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation', *Political Communication* 22/2 (2005), 147–62.

<sup>36</sup> M. Castells, 'The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks and Global Governance', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008), 78–93.

<sup>37</sup> E. Hunter, 'The Arab Revolution and Social Media', *Flipthemed.com*, 2011, accessed at <http://flipthemed.com/index.php/2011/02/the-arab-revolution-and-social-media/> on 15 May 2011.

Similarly to the media forms that developed during the twentieth century, the use of the Internet in electoral campaigns has developed over the last two decades. An important factor in the usefulness of online tools in electoral campaigning is the electoral environment of the respective country, which includes the electoral norms and rules, as well as party organisations. Political parties can benefit from the Internet, particularly in those countries where there are many restrictions and regulations on traditional media, especially television.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, we can say that the Internet has challenged traditional media, because ‘things that you could prevent the traditional media from doing through legal or other means have disappeared’.<sup>39</sup> Many practitioners are very optimistic regarding its use, even believing that social media ‘will take over from classical methods’.<sup>40</sup>

The Internet also offers a suitable way in which to directly appeal to target voters, which is not possible through other media. In addition to replicating existing strategies, it can also serve as a testing ground for innovative and interactive campaigns.

Free advertising on social media can be seen as a sort of bridge between paid-for and free-of-charge advertising, because, although it is not paid for, it has more similarities with traditional paid advertising. Such advertising allows a candidate or a party to determine the content and style of the messages placed online, as well as to monitor their outcomes and effects.

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<sup>38</sup> N. Anstead and A. Chadwick, ‘Parties, Election Campaigning and the Internet: Toward A Comparative Institutional Approach’, in A. Chadwick and P. Howard (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 55–61.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 1 March 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with an MEP on 20 March 2012.

Despite the optimism present among many campaign managers who have started to use the Internet in their campaigns and who have given it a prominent role and consider that new media content is more adjusted to citizens' needs, many scientists still doubt its success in politics and the likelihood of greatly changing the relationship between citizens and politicians. This is due to the fact that an online campaign only reflects the offline one, while the power structures remain the same. Although this may be true for democratic societies, it is difficult to say that online campaigning does not affect power relations in non-democratic societies, as we have seen in the case of the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to imagine a serious campaign in the Western world not using the Internet.

## Campaigning on social media in Europe

The advantage of social media in politics is the possibility of engaging more young adults, 18–35 years old, who are the principal users of these websites and who have a very low rate of participation in elections. These media can 'awaken' citizens, create closer relations between them, provide a better understanding of the EU and engage them on a more personal level. Social media, such as Twitter, are able to drive valuable traffic to political actors' websites through the hyperlinks posted on them. They are becoming more and more influential and, according to some politicians, can have a direct impact on elections, although the majority of researchers still doubt this, especially when it comes to Europe.

As some experts have suggested,<sup>41</sup> it is important to have a presence on the following social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.<sup>42</sup> This selection of social media websites was made based upon the speed of their growth and reach, and also based on the different types of data they publish (e.g. Facebook publishes textual, visual and audio-visual material; Twitter, textual material; YouTube, audio-visual material; and Flickr, visual material) and the different ways they offer of connecting with voters. Although each of them differs from the others, they are all capable of attracting a number of different audiences. It is the individual responsibility of every party to understand social media and use them properly in order to attract people and engage them in European politics. In addition to the creation of a profile, proper content is needed for each medium. Also, it seems to be important for politicians to link politics 'with the everyday lives of people',<sup>43</sup> instead of keeping the conversation on the abstract political level. When it comes to large EU political groups, some politicians argue that, in addition to English, there is a need for other languages to be used, so that other citizens do not feel excluded. Another problem with political groups is the fact that citizens prefer and are more attracted to leaders than to labels.

Through social media, different networks can be created between citizens and politicians, as well as between like-minded politicians themselves. This is a good 'viral' way of building a fan base, because it can help to gather and connect supporters who are politically like-minded, from which a bigger organisation, such as a political party or a political group on the EU level, can later benefit. Many

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, C. Schossow, 'Using Social Media in Political Campaigns', *NewMediaCampaigns.com*, 2009, accessed at <http://www.newmediacampaigns.com/page/using-social-media-in-political-campaigns> on 24 January 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr are the most popular social media websites today.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with an MEP on 27 February 2012.

campaign managers agree that personal presence and interaction are important for social media, especially in the long run, because the interaction makes a politician ‘a real person’ in the online world: ‘If you do Twitter and Facebook, you have to be personable and interactive and present.’<sup>144</sup> However, many politicians argue that being present on social media is very time-consuming, so if they do decide to get involved, they ask their assistants to do the job for them. As one MEP stated: ‘I do not normally make statements myself on social networks.’<sup>145</sup> However, social media require politicians to be more personable than on other media, so this is not considered a good tactic, because a personal presence is often needed. As well as establishing closer contact, trust and sympathy through interaction with people, which is strategically important because ‘people like politicians with a personal touch’,<sup>146</sup> one MEP stated that the relationship can become even closer: ‘[We] develop more personal relations with those whom we consider more constructive, creative and interesting.’<sup>147</sup>

It is quite interesting to monitor the interaction between traditional and new media and to realise that in many, especially urgent, situations, traditional media rely to a great extent on information provided by social media. This is particularly true of Twitter, through which information can be obtained in the fastest way, as tweets are short, posted immediately and generally fairly accurate (at least they have been so far). This is why some European politicians are persuaded that social media will remain ‘a crisis communication tool for a lot of people’,<sup>148</sup> instead of becoming mass media.

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with an MEP on 16 February 2012.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with an MEP on 20 March 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with an MEP on 27 February 2012.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

## Is Twitter beating Facebook?

When comparing different social media, many campaign managers and politicians agree that Twitter is the most relevant and useful in politics at the EU level. This is due to the fact that people on Twitter know more about the EU than the average EU citizen, and they often have links to politics, either professionally or through personal interest. Also, as they have decided to follow politics and politicians by receiving regular tweets, they are considered to be much more informed. This group of people generally consists of journalists, bloggers, experts and political ‘junkies’, who are often opinion makers as well. These are the people who know what is happening on the EU political scene.

‘Twitter users either tend to be professional media people or people committed to and interested in politics’.<sup>49</sup> Twitter is where politicians should target people who feel that they have a political affiliation with a certain politician, political party or political group. Based on the use of specific target groups, spreading information on Twitter can have a much bigger political impact than on other social media, especially if it is used properly. However, European politicians often do not know how to use it or how ‘to shoot at the right time at the right target’.<sup>50</sup> Twitter can have the right impact only if information is tweeted quickly, immediately after something happens, because that is how everyone will spot it. If tweets are not posted immediately, the use of Twitter loses its value.

However, except for Dutch politicians, who see Twitter as a sort of national social network,<sup>51</sup> the majority of individual

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with a campaign manager on 12 January 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with a campaign manager on 12 January 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 2 February 2012.

MEPs have more of a presence on Facebook than on Twitter. This was shown in the Fleishman-Hillard survey from 2011, whose results stressed that only 34% of MEPs use Twitter, while 68% are on Facebook.<sup>52</sup> Comparing the different political groups on Twitter, there is a similar but much lower result compared to Facebook. In June 2012, the European People's Party (EPP) Group had the highest number of followers (7,418), followed by the Socialists and Democrats (6,039) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE; 4,966).<sup>53</sup> However, and despite the fact that the followers could all be opinion makers, these figures are relatively low, taking into consideration the European electorate of 375 million voters.<sup>54</sup>

European political parties were also highly active on social media. Figures from December 2012, obtained from the EPP, showed that the EPP had 9,747 followers on Twitter, followed by the Party of European Socialists (PES; 4,788) and the European Green Party (4,237). On Facebook in December 2012, the EPP had 110,585 followers, ALDE 51,853 and PES 9,927.

Most European politicians and their advisors struggle with the idea of Twitter as a medium that can be used for campaigning: 'Twitter is the most direct communication tool . . . but it's not a campaign tool.'<sup>55</sup> Many of them see a clear-cut distinction between Facebook and Twitter, stating that they have different functions: 'Facebook is for communicating with people and Twitter is for informing people about things in a quick way, they have different functions.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fleishman-Hillard, *European Parliament Digital Trends Survey*, 2011, accessed at <http://www.epdigitaltrends.eu/> on 10 January 2012.

<sup>53</sup> These figures were obtained by the author of this text at the time of production of this research paper.

<sup>54</sup> In a comparison with the US, Barack Obama has around 17 million followers, while Mitt Romney has around 600,000.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 20 March 2012.

With nearly one billion accounts, Facebook is considered to be ‘a gravitational centre of social media’.<sup>57</sup> That is why it is included in many political campaigning strategies. Alongside free advertising through Facebook groups and pages, using Facebook advertisements is another way to raise awareness among target groups.

In comparison to other social media, Facebook is perceived as a much bigger site and one where interaction is more casual, and this can contribute to a more informal atmosphere with more relaxed discussion among users. One advisor observes, ‘I prefer Facebook because it gives me more space to express myself; we can also put pictures, so it feels a bit closer and there are more responses and, I think, more interaction.’<sup>58</sup>

However, several studies<sup>59</sup> have shown that political actors in Europe usually try to offer information through social media rather than interacting with their electorate and engaging them. Nevertheless, people like to express themselves through social media, as this is not possible through traditional media. In addition, one of social media’s main advantages is the possibility of engaging people through them, by organising events in which they can participate, such as a Facebook chat with a politician interested in a certain target group (e.g. youth).

When it comes to the use of social media, based on the interviews it seems that MEPs mostly use Facebook, Twitter and sometimes LinkedIn, although it is unclear how LinkedIn can be used to communicate with supporters and potential

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<sup>57</sup> J. Jamison, ‘Beyond Facebook: The Rise of Interest-Based Social Networks’, *TechCrunch.com*, accessed at <http://techcrunch.com/2012/02/18/beyond-facebook-the-rise-of-interest-based-social-networks/> on 14 April 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

<sup>59</sup> L. Vesnic-Alujevic, *The Role of Internet in Political Communication: A Case Study of the European Parliament Elections* (Ghent: University Press, 2011).

voters. These social media are quite different and therefore attract different audiences, because ‘different people use different social media’.<sup>60</sup>

A Facebook page is considered to be among the top 5% of Facebook pages if it has over 10,000 fans, and in the European context every Facebook page with a 6-digit number of fans should be considered very important.<sup>61</sup> In the US, one can talk of millions of fans for certain pages<sup>62</sup> (e.g. President Obama’s page has over 27 million fans, presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s page has over 2 million and former President Bush’s page has 2 million), which differs considerably from the situation in Europe. The politicians with the highest number of fans in Europe are former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (over 700,000), former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (over 400,000) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (almost 200,000). At the EU level, the most popular page is the European Parliament page with 380,000 fans and rising. Among political groups in the Parliament, the EPP’s page has almost 90,000 fans, the Alliance of Socialists and Democrats has approximately 8,500 fans, and the Socialists and Democrats has around 2,500. So, in contrast to the US, European politicians and campaign managers still need to understand social media and how they work, and to learn how best to use them. As one MEP said: ‘You must be willing to learn and develop your presence there!’<sup>63</sup> Although many politicians state that comments on Facebook are taken into consideration in policymaking processes, and we have seen this to be true in the ACTA case, it is not common practice.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 20 March 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with a campaign manager on 12 January 2012.

<sup>62</sup> These figures were obtained by the author of this text at the time of production of this research paper.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with an MEP on 20 March 2012.

## Conclusions

Social media started to be used in politics during the electoral campaign for the 2008 US elections, as a response to the growing need for innovative strategies in electoral campaigns. After initial success, their use quickly spread to other parts of the world in a more or less successful way. Although in the US social media are mostly used to build a base of volunteers who will amplify traditional campaign efforts and fundraising, their role in other parts of the world is more restricted.

During the 2009 EP electoral campaign, social media started to be used by politicians running for the EP as complementary tools to more traditional campaigning, but their use still needs to be better enhanced and integrated into overall campaign strategies.

Interviews held during the first half of 2012 revealed that the significance of social media in European politics is growing.<sup>64</sup> Along with it, the online participation of citizens is growing too. It appears that politicians are not completely aware of the strengths of social media, such as free advertising and the possibility of reaching, advertising to and motivating a large audience, and that they are afraid of their constraints. The main constraint is the fact that social media require more time and engagement from politicians, and interaction with citizens that is not always feasible during electoral campaigns. Despite the possible help from assistants, advisors and so on, it is important that politicians actively participate in online activities in person, for which they often do not have enough time.

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<sup>64</sup> According to the 2011 Fleishman-Hillard survey, 61% of MEPs consider social networks as effective channels of communication.

Two major sites that are distinguished in European politics are Facebook and Twitter. While Twitter offers a very short and direct outlet, Facebook is more informal and interactive. Therefore, use of the two sites needs to be complementary.

However, as political consultants think that social media could play a big role in the 2014 campaign, there is a current need to engage people through social media in order to build a campaign platform for the 2014 European Parliament elections. This will only happen if politicians can be 'very social and very personal at the same time'<sup>65</sup> and can show people that their opinions count by interacting with them. Otherwise greater influence from campaigning on social media cannot be expected.

## Recommendations

- There is a need for a more systematic and effective use of social media, in politics at the EU level. This has already been noted by many political advisors, but has not yet been implemented in MEPs' online strategies.
- In order for social media to have a wider application in electoral campaigns, it is imperative that political groups in the European Parliament reinforce their infrastructure. At the same time, politicians should promote greater use of social media among European citizens. MEPs should promote their use in their own constituencies.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with a political advisor on 27 February 2012.

- European politicians should use social media to build networks of supporters, engaging with the community by communicating with the audience. This should be done through greater personalisation of their social media profiles, monitoring the content posted and regularly following the discussions that develop on them. Their stronger presence could influence political debate, especially when it is considered that online discussions can shape people's opinions and behaviours, as has been seen recently.
- So far, social media discourse in Europe has been rather focused on the elite. However, in order for social media to be used in electoral campaigns, there is a need for the public to become more engaged at the grass-roots level. Politicians should encourage citizens to discuss different issues by posting about current, provocative and interesting topics.

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