

Ever Challenged Union: Exploring Ways Out of the Crises

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***Representation and social media:
How online participation affects representation
practices and political branding***

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Abstract

Empirical evidence suggest that representatives demonstrate an increasing interest to communicate with citizens through social media for policy discussion. A few years back, policy formulation was considered a process entrenched within layers of partisan control, securely preserved from non-member interference. Today, a growing volume of online interactions during a routine time-frame refers to policy suggestions directed towards representatives in the form of messages, tweets and comments. The volume of interactions related to activity promotion, behaviour justification or simple networking is also growing mostly during campaigning periods. More and more, politicians follow the pathway of electronic communication, diminishing the distance from their voters. MEPs in particular, are faced with an ever growing demand for responsiveness and accountability from their constituents within a framework of European scepticism. Having a dispersed presence between their constituencies and the European Parliament headquarters, they may have a greater incentive to bridge the geographical and physical gap through social networking. In fact, what may have started as online campaigning or advertising activity has now developed into an interactional trend with consequences for representation practices and political participation. So far, the issue of direct online citizen involvement in the definition of policies has not been adequately addressed in line with the rapid expansion of Web 2.0 applications. This paper tries to critically evaluate and identify a theoretical framework of unmediated online participation and the implications for preference formulation and political branding, focusing upon MEP-constituent interactions through Twitter.

Keywords

e-participation, social networking, representation practices, preference formulation, e-deliberation, political branding, MEPs, Twitter.

Introduction: Incentives to research online participation

This paper reviews published empirical studies related to online political participation through networked social media, while taking into account theories of representation. The aim is to link online deliberation with implications for representation practices and preference formulation and define the issues that deserve further research with reference to online communication of MEP and their constituents in Twitter.

My first observation is that during the last ten years there is a significant increase in the number of studies examining issues related to the influence of the internet in politics ranging from party reforms to electoral systems, protest mobilisation and electoral campaigning. Apparently, network technology has become an influential factor defining new approaches and fields of research within the domain of political studies.

Some recent studies exist next to older ones referring to: web 1.0 technologies in politics (e.g. blogs/webpages/emails) (Wright, 2009; Kalnes, 2009; Jackson & Lilleker, 2007; Bentivegna, 2006), e-government initiatives (Stamati et.al., 2015; Deligiaouri, 2013; Medimorec, 2010), social networks and online campaigning for MPs/MEPs/parties (Murthy, 2015; Southern, 2015; Larsson, 2014; D'heer & Verdegem, 2014; Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014; Quinlan et.al., 2015; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013; Karlson, 2013, Costello, 2012; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009), online mobilisation and activism (Varnali & Gorgulu, 2015; Theoharis et.al., 2015; Breindl, 2010), online participation (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Bimber & Copeland, 2013; de Zuniga et.al., 2010; Best & Krueger, 2005; Albrecht, 2006), internet in national parliaments or the EP (Leston-Bandeira, 2014; Papaloi & Gouscos, 2010; Dai, 2007), preference formulation (Oser et.al., 2014; Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2013), party branding and political marketing during campaigning (Lilleker, 2015; Frame & Brachotte, 2015; Pich & Dean, 2015; Pich et.al., 2014; Smith, 2001).

While the existing literature in the fields of online participation, deliberation and representation is vast as demonstrated above, there is a lacuna regarding studies about Social Networks (SN) used as platforms of individualised political deliberation outside electoral periods and their impact on representation practices. Furthermore, there is a specific literature

gap with reference to MEPs as preference formulators promoting self-image branding strategies during online deliberation in SN like Twitter (Twideliberation).

The scarcity of literature that justifies further research into this issue is revealed after applying a combination of filters reflecting upon the following considerations:

Stakeholders: On the supply side the focus is upon MEPs and their interaction with constituents at the individual level. MEPs are elected for a supranational assembly by a national constituency, with a rather nationally defined party-centred agenda and enjoy a higher degree of independence compared to national MPs. My interest is on incumbent MEPs, seeking legitimisation of actions and having the power to propose policies, not on campaigning candidates. On the demand side the focus is on the autonomous individual, not on how aggregations of citizens, the civil society or NGOs promote online deliberation in a collective manner.

Agenda: It is not about how ideological, partisan or elite priorities predetermine policies and agendas at national and supranational level (at national parties or the EP Groups). The focus is upon personalised direct interactions and preference formulation from citizens at the constituency (actual or virtual) level.

Field: The focus is on Web 2.0 SN platforms and especially Twitter which allows synchronised, public, direct, unmediated interaction. It is not about the internet in general, web pages and emails as promotional mechanisms or anonymous online forums for debate and protest.

Nature of interaction: The focus is not upon mobilisation initiatives, protest enhancement or civil society negotiations. It is about individual initiatives to interact with established representatives in a productive way, promoting preferences that may turn into policies.

Time Frame: The focus is not on campaigning periods and pro-election or pro-referendum interactions. The interest is on routine periods of typical MEP legislative activity, where electoral issues are not obscuring the intentions of participants.

Data: The focus is not on the quantity of interactions measured by clicks, characters, speed of response and number of online friends as indicators of sizeable participation. It is about revealing the incentives and interpretations of MEPs and their voters, as to the value of this interaction for accountability, inclusion, preference formulation, political image, representation practices.

Angle: Political branding in Europe is usually addressed with regard to parties rather than individuals. Even in the case of individuals it has neither been highly researched within the modern framework of SN nor with regard to MEPs outside campaigning periods.

Role: The focus is upon MEPs as receptors of preferences and designers of policies in a virtual environment. It is not about their role and technical function as legislators within the EP or their actual behaviour in legislative groups and committees or their voting attitude.

Taking the above considerations into account, we end up with a lack of a coherent meaningful framework addressing the interpretations of online deliberation for SN participants. Thus the focus of this paper is on the facilitation of direct unmediated debate at the individual level i.e. between constituents and their MEPs. My incentive has been an increasing twideliberation, taking place outside campaigning or election periods. It is not uncommon anymore to come across online discourse in Twitter, between citizens and their representatives (discussing issues like social security or health legislation) which result in a form of commitment to pursue the promotion of specific policies.

From the citizen's point of view, this unmediated process of interaction begins as a way to approach authoritative figures without the intervention of partisan or administrative filters. Accessing a representative's Twitter account in a public domain, sending a tweet or a direct message, is far easier than visiting the representative's office, requesting an appointment, expecting administrative personnel interventions or even writing/emailing a petition. Apart from the obvious time-saving advantage it is the increased chances of receiving a response, that facilitates citizen needs in a better way. Theoretically speaking, the representative can ignore undesired citizen approaches. In practice, as Lilleker (2015:121) states, '*in the majority of Social Networks ... public interaction is unavoidable*'. The cost of damaging the political image by avoiding to reply once publically approached, usually generates some form of response from the representative. The opposite, resembles a harmful case of refusing to answer a question during a press conference or a public debate.

From the representative's point of view, the extensive use of virtual domains imposes an increasing correspondence and a demonstration of effort to take into account people's comments, either because of a genuine interest or because of a need to preserve or build an attractive public image for electoral purposes. I argue that this can have a transforming effect to the way preferences turn into proposed policies and form legislation at the European level.

This form of twideliberation without party mediation, could either be taken to the next level by those representatives who believe in the reformative power of the internet, or prove to be nothing but a branding tool if used solely for image promotion at the individual level.

Online deliberation is dependent upon the satisfaction of the two interacting parts (representatives-constituents), otherwise it will not sustain. If online deliberation becomes a vague vision, a manipulative process or something trivial for voters, they will eventually abandon it or transform their online presence into something more suitable to their need for political participation. Accordingly, if twideliberation becomes a burden for representatives, a costly process not generating adequate (electoral or publicity) benefits, then they might also have the incentive to discourage or avoid it. Consequently, the value of this direct personalised interaction between representatives and constituents, is a matter of perspective and there is a need to evaluate in a deep and qualitative way the standpoints of the two sides (supply and demand).

The analysis of possible implications from the rather recent establishment of Web 2.0 deliberation, is focusing upon some major challenges for voters and their representatives: a) a continuous unmediated feedback from constituents, supporting accountability on existing legislature proposals, b) the potential of citizen influence on new policy formulation, c) the possibility of preference influence during the educational stage of deliberation by MEPs d) MEPs incentive to prioritise political branding and image enhancement during twideliberation.

The search for accountability in electronic democracy

Much of the debate on the usefulness of online political participation, stems from the belief that it enhances accountability and legitimacy, two main features of democratic representation, the lack of which is considered responsible for the democratic deficits and the disengagement of people from politics. Rising populist extremes (left or right) in several European countries, invest in the public disappointment and polarisation stirred by the economic recession. There is a consensus that European citizens should be re-included into political life and exploiting the reformative potential of the internet is considered by many a proper solution. So far there seems to prevail an unmediated type of interaction, where

citizens directly express their preferences on political issues to their elected representatives and receive consequent responses that may or may not satisfy them. This open process takes place in the public domain of SN platforms with emphasis on Twitter.

Coleman (2004) a few years before the boom of social networking, optimistically considered that internet had the power to bring citizens closer to decision making in a direct and unmediated way. He supported that the disconnection of citizens from politics could be marginalised by electronic democracy, encouraging citizens to become informed and mobilised (2004:12-13). Vedel in 2003 suggested a three-layer approach for the exploitation of the internet potential in politics. 'Information' is a vital prerequisite for political participation, with independent opinions formulated by 'informed citizens'. The 'discussion' of publicly accessed information between citizens and representatives, has to take place within a trustworthy public e-space (nowadays a SN platform).

By arguing that modern democracies should pursue the creation of electronic platforms for unmediated interpretations and political judgments, Coleman (2004) established the notion of the autonomous network-empowered citizen who is sceptical to uncritical participation and open to forms of direct communication. As a growing portion of citizens, is seeking access to an open renewable political agenda, parties should question their attractiveness as hierarchical structures contested by ideological manipulations and false promises (2004:18-19).

Calais-Gonzalez (2010) argues that as the use of internet increases, the average ability of citizens to effectively control politicians becomes greater, through increasing involvement combined with autonomy, participation and critical production of ideas which are vital against absolutism (2010:2-3 & 7). In any case, to actively participate in decision making, requires a participative citizen willing to contribute to policy formulation in a direct manner (Breindl, 2010:50-51).

Breindl (2010) considers the phase of discussion as a deliberation process which requires informed active citizens to confront representatives publically and directly express political views. The discussion phase eventually leads to 'participation', with citizens expressing suggestions and engagement initiatives in the form of audits of political actions, decision-making contributions, policy proposals or protest-mobilisations (Vedel & Lilleker, 2013:3-6).

To Arnstein (1969:216) participation is a form of strategy for the redistribution of social power, allowing reforms which enhance the sharing of social benefits. If power remains intact to the hands of those who possess it, then the participation of the weaker simply justifies the existing status quo. In our case, participation is empowering people to question their representatives (MEPs), not with regard to their authority but in relation to the use of this authority for the public benefit. To citizens, using the internet for political participation, affirms a sense of belonging in a way that surpasses the vertical integration of traditional hierarchical entities (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). To politicians, this alters the traditional relationship between the ruler and the ruled, as an increasing number of citizens monitor political decisions (Calais-Gonzalez, 2010:4-5).

Interestingly enough, Arnstein's (1969:217) classic eight-step ladder of citizen participation into civic life, is quite relevant when matched to the SN facilitation of political participation. The first four steps 'manipulation', 'therapy', 'informing' and 'consultation' involve the exchange of information in a way that undermines genuine participation. The case of individualised interactions between MEPs and citizens for deliberation purposes, is relevant to the 5th step of the ladder called 'placation' where people have the ability to suggest ideas and proposals but power-holders retain the right to decide how to proceed. The 6th step named 'partnership' is where negotiations and trade-offs take place. This sounds like an ideal accomplishment for the existing nature of SNs where people would have the ability to ensure that MEPs abide to the agreed proposals. Anything more than that (steps 7 'delegated power' and 8 'citizen control') is taking us away from the representative character of democracy towards a more direct democracy.

Without trying to promote a normative approach towards technology, I believe that internet will further affect participation and deliberation, with reformative consequences for established representation practices. Although it is only 5 years since Jackson & Lilleker (2009) concluded that '*Web 2.0 has not revolutionised the representative process*' and '*...the impact of web 2.0 has been marginal*', the changes in online communication since then have been enormous. Almost all of the incumbent MPs and MEPs in UK use Twitter to communicate with their constituents. The role of a representative to make decisions in an era of mass media and pluralism, is not justified unless proper dissemination of decision-making information takes place. Citizens remain a crucial component of EU processes and the

increasing use of SN for political interaction with representatives, should be further researched as a form of democratic regeneration.

From collective to individual – Twitter as a virtual constituency

The increasing use of social networking for online deliberation, is in line with Gauja's (2015:89) statement that political participation is shifting towards unmediated individualised forms and methods of contact. The obvious victims of such a development are institutions of collective action like parties, which face continuous decline in member volumes. As citizens become unattached pursuing individual interests, technological development facilitates their quest in the form of online deliberation which gives them the opportunity to discuss, propose, promote and formulate their preferences in a synchronous mode of contact directly with representatives.

Breindl (2010:44) also refers to the issue of individualisation in social media with relation to political expression. In line with Dahlgren (2009), she addresses the new challenge for political practices, with citizens forming customised political interventions, based upon their personal interests rather than traditional ideologies.

Several studies suggest that the development of Web 2.0 permits more interactive forms of communication, surpassing the static informational role of the internet. SNs present an opportunity for representatives to link with their constituents through a participatory strategy, allowing them to discuss political issues and contribute to the formulation of policies (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013:190-191; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:101). This individualisation trend is twofold. It refers to the pursuit of personal interest rather than partisan collective goals of common good and to the pursuit of personalised processes of deliberation and direct interactions with stakeholders who can promote these goals. Issues constructed individually, involve the selection of informal modes of action as opposed to traditional, formal, duty-based engagements.

Emphasising on the individualistic nature of modern political participation, Gauja (2015) recognises that the expression of citizen preferences derives from the pursuit of personal interests. The new style of online political activism raises questions as to how parties and

representatives facilitate and respond to citizen requests for deliberation. There seems to be a hollowing effect, moving party supporters from partisan layers towards direct forms of interaction with representatives. Deliberation and reflexivity are characteristics that promote legitimacy in an unmediated interaction. Taking forward Saward's (2006) representative claim, Gauja notes that at the party level, the opening of structures to new ideas and influences is an inevitable response to catch up with active public consultation occurring at the individual level between constituents-representatives.

With this in mind I focus upon the relationship that voters build online with their MEPs on SN platforms like Twitter. Twitter is a virtual community consisting of profiles created by real people using in most cases their real identities. The members of this community exist there by choice; they constitute a virtual gathering of individual personalities because they see this as desirable. From the moment they decide to behave in a political manner (discussing issues, addressing problems, expressing views and finally contacting their representatives or proposing ideas and policies to them) they become politically active and thus they form a type of virtual constituency. People become members of this new constituency in their own free will, not by birthright.

It is of great interest to examine the relationship that citizens and MEPs build online in a nested environment that simulates a constituency without the traditional boundaries of one. The constituents are free to leave and re-enter the virtual constituency, have no vested interests related to geographical, socio-economic or territorial issues, may or may not have knowledge of the MEPs characteristics, usually do not know the other members and moreover they do not know or feel the collectivity of an exclusive group with defined rights and obligations. The fact that they can login to this virtual environment from another region or even country, does not diminish the relevancy of their interaction with MEPs. Their relation is not based upon exchanges of electoral nature (a vote for a policy) but on the incremental substance of deliberation for policy formulation.

Voters' participation is a considered and crystallised decision, in other words a true democratic choice. In this respect, the degree of apathy and abstain is nonexistent compared to a real constituency. Furthermore, by entering into an online political dialogue, their participation starts from a point much further ahead than that of a typical offline constituent who is supposed to acquire a certain degree of information and knowledge before entering

any political exchanges. Information and knowledge of basic concepts or at least news about politics are taken for granted, because getting into an interaction with a representative requires some knowledge of his background or his current affairs or the context where he belongs.

The decision to interact with a MEP online is not the result of prior deliberation or mutual understanding of several entities. It is not like a collaborative initiation of active citizens, mutually deriving to a single consensus as to what kind of proposal or interactional debate to have with their MEP. There is no unofficial voter-representative assigned to communicate on behalf of many, by tweeting to the official political representative (MEP). It is a rather intuitive individualistic initiative, impulsive or prepared, externalising the need for participation and self expression. The type of relationship that people build online with MEPs is of essence in order to assess the representational functions that take place in this virtual environment.

Preference formulation as a twofold process

Recent empirical studies have established the importance of SNs for preference formulation. In their research Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2013) used content analysis to decode the different styles of interaction between MEPs and citizens. They established three modes of communication: homemade (informational), impression management (self-promotional) and participatory (argumentative). The later mode is the one associated to Web 2.0 platforms, encouraging participation, enabling discussion of policies, ideas and opinions and eventually facilitating the expression of constituents' preferences. The researchers suggest that social networking under this strategy can reshape the participatory process especially during non-election periods.

Wishing to examine MEP responsiveness to voters, Vasilopoulou and Gattermann (2013) addressed the issue of congruence, between MEPs and their constituents on policy preferences. They used regression models and quantitative measures based on two surveys, the 2009 European Election Study (EES) for voters and the 2010 European Parliament Research Group survey for MEPs. Although low response rates on both surveys limit the results, one of their interesting points is that the frequency of contacts between MEPs and citizens, associate with higher levels of congruence on policy issues.

Although these results seem quite optimistic, as Arnstein (1969) suggests, in the lower steps of the schematic eight-rung ladder of participation, the distortion or absence of appropriate information, creates a fake participatory effect, which legitimises the participatory process, yet only offers PR gains for the power-holders. What is interesting during the process, is that an 'educational' function takes place, where experts formulate the participants' views in their interest. As Disch (2011) suggests, preferences evolve within an interparty competition as a response to communication from elites or representatives towards the citizens, with an educational purpose (citizens learning on a top-to-bottom flow). This is where the manipulation possibility is raised.

The implication from the above is that regardless of their intention, MEPs have an advantage over their counterparts which refers to their elite power position. With Twitter facilitating an easier mode of interaction, it is crucial to empirically define if MEPs have the incentive to manipulate their counterparts during online deliberation, trying to 'educate' them in a way that satisfies their interests rather than those of their constituents'. Further research is needed to examine if this advantage is used and if it relates to MEPs adoption of citizen preferences or to citizens being influenced by MEPs in forming these preferences.

In a modern SN framework of online deliberation, this would be similar to MEPs 'educating' citizens with their expert knowledge of European priorities, aiming at formulating their preferences according to their desires and conveniences. Although a first reaction is to remind that SN participants are not ignorant, uninformed, easy to manipulate individuals, the fact is that incumbent MEPs are the power-holders, having indeed a deeper expertise on EP legislation processes, which they can use in their benefit. I believe that even if this is true, social networking in Twitter gives citizens the opportunity to surpass this twofold communication, by addressing representatives directly on an individualistic manner. This diminishes the possibility of MEPs educating voters as they see fit, because it is impossible to adequately attend many separate educational demands at the same time. Only in the case where voter interactions follow a specific pattern identical for many cases (e.g. retweeting on the same subject using ideas from previous users to make an argument/issue/claim stronger), MEPs may have the incentive to act as educators or even manipulators.

Furthermore, Saward (2006) established an interpretive rather than normative view of representation, where constituency interests are aesthetically conceived by the various audiences. He believes that these audiences produce codes and based upon those, politicians construct claims or images of their constituencies from a certain perspective. These versions of the voters' interests constitute representation a twofold process: not only constituents choose their representatives during elections but representatives also 'choose' their constituents by demonstrating (performing) certain characteristics and capacities or by claiming possession of specific features (2006:301-302).

This view also gives ground to the branding ability of representatives, who may decide to either focus on suitably image-enhancing preferences or try to shape the audience preferences according to their specific interests. The issue of constituents' choice by the MEP, relates to the value-base and personality traits exploitation. Designing a persona that fits a specific audience is obviously a marketing technique referring to potential electoral gains. Further research and testing should focus on assessing the strategic objectives and motivations of MEPs when presenting their persona online during their interactions with constituents and also the impact of this interaction on the views of the constituents, the added value and preference promotion.

Online representation practices

Representational typologies have occurred as a result of long term debate on the features and characteristics of representation. Pitkin, Mansbridge, Saward, Urbinati, Andeweg etc. have offered explanations for various types, forms and concepts of representation which I will try to link with the framework of online participation-deliberation.

The traditional considerations on representation are best summarised by Pitkin's work (1967). Pitkin raises an interesting question that could be rephrased for the case of MEPs. If representatives are elected locally (constituency), should they pursue their constituents good or the public good? In our case, if MEPs are elected within a constituency (UK) is it necessary to represent the interests of this constituency or should they represent the national interests in the EP? Can there be representation of locality in the EP? Similarly, in a country like Greece with no constituencies for the EP, how can elected MEPs address issues from the most

underdeveloped regions? Even for a small country like Greece, a MEP cannot have sufficient knowledge or interaction with constituents from every corner of the country. Could this mean that the issues addressed are basically issues that the party of origin or the EP group promote? Is the welfare of the whole, represented this way?

In relation to those questions Pitkin (1967:218) believes that to formulate a general objective for a good representation, we must first take into account the individual or local claims and interests. Pitkin views representation as a responsive independent judgement of the representative over an issue, which is based upon the general interest of all of his constituents. The represented retain the right to evaluate this judgement and take appropriate action. Total alignment is not a prerequisite and conflicts may arise. They are acceptable as long as representatives offer convincing explanations not based upon their individualistic benefit (1967:209). Unfortunately, voters are mostly uninformed, apathetic, politically inactive or loyal to partisan agendas. Their representatives are not usually consulting with them; they receive pressures and demands from various fields and endure mutual disagreement as to how to perform their role (1967:219).

I argue that all these issues can be addressed within a virtual constituency, where already informed and interested individuals undergo online interactions. The collection of these by the MEPs is a form of response towards popular will, the kind that Pitkin sees as a prerequisite for representation (1967:224&233). Truly, today's MEPs receive partisan influence as well as other elite and interest group suggestions, not to mention the relations with other MEPs and certain balances that they must preserve within the EP framework. Plus the desire for re-election can lead to certain compromises. In a virtual constituency, such reconciliations take place in a collective public manner. An open debate of individualised claims-making taking place during twideliberation, can assist the MEP to evaluate conflicting claims and decide upon proper action which can be announced and explained to participants as a form of pro-legitimation of actions not yet taken. The wealth of suggestions coming from residents of different districts (yet all members of the same virtual constituency), will address local as well as issues of national and supranational importance that MEPs can relate to policy making.

In more recent work, Pitkin (2004:340) believes that nowadays citizens are trained to the concept of deliberation and build a participative character that takes them into addressing issues of greater national and supranational importance. In the MEP-constituent respect, this

means that people may choose to address issues that have a great national interest with reference to the European dimension like e.g. immigration, health insurance, pension reforms etc.; issues that MEPs will eventually face as part of EP legislation.

To Urbinati (2000:762) participation is the choice to be present, whether this is a silent presence or a deliberative presence. In modern SN platforms this is also true, as citizens may choose to just observe twitter dialogues with MEPs or embark into a discussion of their own. In the first case the value of technology goes as far as the transmission of a message and it can become a tool for MEPs (under certain circumstances) for marketing and branding actions that reproduce existing power relations. In the second case, technology becomes a tool for citizens to combine deliberation with decision making in simultaneity, thus supporting a representation-participation continuum (2000:765-766).

Is it a real deliberation when citizens interact with MEPs online? Could it be just a form of communication of indicative suggestions? Urbinati (2000) explains that if this interaction transforms into a discussion of the topic at hand in the public domain (usually the case with Twitter), then it becomes a form of deliberation. Then opinions may be discussed and modes of action on behalf of the voters, may become optional for the MEP to choose from. The question then is which proposals may be promoted by MEPs in the next stage. Is it the opinion of the majority? Is it an idea that sounds more appropriate or likeable? Is it the option that the MEP or his party consider best? Can this transform MEP to a 'surrogate' representative? (see Mansbridge typology). Is *Twideliberation* making MEPs prioritise the interests of constituents according to those of their party or EP Group? These are questions that need to be addressed. One thing for sure is that deliberation connects participation and representation as components of the democratic political action (2000:759).

Based upon Mill, Urbinati suggests that the argument against those who consider individual preference identification as an unworthy process (because representative's function is to pursue the general interest ie public good), is that public good is not apparent or defined in advance. Agreeing with Saward (2006:300) that interests are not clear or self-evident, she claims that if they were specified, then they would be pursued by people without the need of a representative or even a government; people would simply embark upon attending them without prior notice. Consequently, *twideliberation* is exactly the way to put forward various different interests of the individuals who compose a larger population (2000:774) Eventually,

representation is future oriented as it comprises both the constituents' visions and the MEP's autonomy to choose an appropriate proposal. Thus, viewing representation as advocacy, highlights its two main functions: individual expression and inclusion (2000:761).

Building on principal-agent theory, Andeweg (2005) addresses the divergence of views on representation between people and representatives (representation from above=accountability or from below=responsiveness). He distinguishes representatives as either delegates or trustees, the traditional dyadic configuration of normative thinking that Mansbridge (2003) considers analogous to a promissory type of representation. The typical question in this respect is always there: should MEPs take into account voters' preferences (delegates) or act on their own decisive will (trustees)? Pitkin (1967:163) thinks that expert knowledge is one of the reasons to have representatives in the first place. The counterargument is that with the expansion of media and news networks, people feel (sometimes mistakenly) like they know more than ever before about the various political issues and that representatives have not much of an expertise anymore. This creates the incentive to think that representatives should not savour an uncontrollable degree of independence and people should have a say to the definition of policies.

Mansbridge's (2003) typology expands the traditional promissory model of principal-agent theory in representation. The normative conception of a mandate-trustee and a promise-sanction duality, is closer to the issue of accountability and remains the most prevalent empirically. She introduces new types of representation, based upon the actions of representatives with regard to their strategies for election. Anticipatory representation is about predicting future preferences of the voters and acting accordingly (2003:517). The interesting thing about this type is that representatives have the incentive to match people's preferences with the ones they anticipate. This allows room for manipulation/construction of preferences (not already expressed) so that when expressed, they will be in line with those already anticipated. This brings forward the educative role of MEPs, further addressed elsewhere in this paper. It also affects the way we measure accountability which becomes now forward looking.

One of the demands of anticipatory representation is constant communication between representatives-constituents to 'feed' their anticipation with fresh data that help improve the 'educational' function. A few years back, communication would be a huge issue and

anticipatory efforts would be very risky or at least very costly. Now with SN facilities and the online presence of MEPs, the need for informed communication is served. To Mansbridge (2003:520) this is more likely to cause MEPs to use their power to influence preferences. This in turn shifts representation from the accountability function, towards deliberation which becomes the same as a successful negotiation for voter satisfaction.

Gyroscopic representation (2003:521) is another introduced type related to the scope of this paper. It focuses upon the incentive of representatives to act according to their inner beliefs, principles and values. These representatives are elected because people prefer them for their personal attributes like honesty, integrity, patriotism etc. This type is more connected to partisan characteristics and commitments (or even sanctions) and suggests predictable behaviours. With a gyroscopic representative, voters influence policies indirectly through a general legislative behaviour that is more or less expected, not by defining policies in an individualised deliberation process. This is far from the concept of accountability and closer to that of predictability, as voters can only expect to see predicted behaviours materialise.

The interesting thing about this in relation to MEPs is that EU integration requires an ongoing produce of policies, which cannot be based solely upon the 'general attitude' of MEPs to conform to partisan or personal principles or their tendency to be pro- or anti- European. Social consensus is required at the European level regarding policies that affect the well-being of the peoples of Europe; otherwise people's future will be defined by elites and interests foreign to them. What happens if a MEP has the aspiration to return to the national political field as MP, thus exhibits conformity to partisan desires on legislature? Or what if a MEP is a former MP relieved from national partisan conformities, willing to pursue endeavours which have never before been predicted during his MP service? The only way of rewarding-sanctioning in this type of representation is by voting at the end of the term. Only a case of IT enabled public consultation can justify the actions of a surrogate MEP, by examining whether his legislative behaviour is conforming to the expectations people had when voting for him.

Mansbridge's contribution by introducing these types is on adding a new meaning for accountability and deliberation. My opinion is that representatives are faced with new challenges which can only be addressed by the facilitating power of SNs. SNs like Twitter can be the test-beds for new considerations, relations, exchanges and solutions directed to the long-term interests of engaged stakeholders.

The case of political branding and other implications

Branding is an important element of the contemporary political world for parties and candidates (Smith, 2001:990). Back in 2001 Smith, suggested that image promotion is best contacted through paid media advertising, celebrities and events. Of course there was no indication back then that social networking would alter political communication and participation to such an extent. Empirical evidence nowadays reveal how online branding is entrenched in the political persona of candidates.

The transformation of citizen participation into a PR medium for MEPs, is something that Arnstein (1969:218), implied as the phenomenon of distorted participation. It occurs when stakeholders with power 'educate' participants over an issue in a way which 'engineers' their support on that issue, producing a false legitimisation effect. To Arnstein this comes from the manipulation of one-way information flowing from top to bottom (1969:219). In practice, Twitter participants are hard to be fooled by a manipulated flow of information, as they already possess both an interest and a degree of knowledge over the specifics of the issues in discussion; they are after all independently informed prior to entering the discussion. 'Who is informing them and where is this information produced' is a very interesting question but we can only assume that independent information does exist for those who seek for it.

As Pich et al (2014:1) state, the concept of a brand incorporates the key values of a product/service. In a political context with a focus on MEPs, a brand would have to collect basic qualities as well as distinct personal features, aiming at creating loyalty and emotional attachment (2014:2). Branding as a value-based device, it carries a promise and has to be accompanied by a proper communication strategy (2014:3-4). The brand demands a consistency in behaviour and can be applied both to individuals and organisations. It also creates a sense of belonging, which for a MEP could refer to characteristics from the party of origin. In terms of a target market, the Twitter virtual constituency of MEP followers (voter base) is what MEPs aim to expand as much as possible. We must keep in mind though, that a SN virtual constituency, may not exactly correspond to the actual constituency where the MEP has an electoral interest.

To Pich & Dean (2015:10-11), the MEP is considered to be a leader of his own political brand even when sharing a partisan brand that is affecting his overall image. From a cultural point, the demonstration of specific personal values, may relate to a broad set of party principles or to a more individualised agenda (2015:12). One of the findings of Pich et al (2014) study on the UK Conservative party, showed that at the local level (constituency), the central (party) message may be obscured by local issues (2014:12-13). The degree of adherence to central or decentralised relationships, is indicative of the power distribution taking place in virtual environments, where representatives are free to pursue reciprocal relationships with their electorate as distinct personalities (2015:13).

With an individualised element present by default in the communicative strategy used on Twitter, self-image promotion from MEPs towards presenting a desired identity, cannot override the set of existing values and beliefs already demonstrated in their online presence. Being an internal stakeholder in the MEP-citizen interaction, private (almost biographical) narratives have already taken place forming an identity (Pich & Dean, 2015:14-15). Pretending to be someone else is not a feasible communication strategy in the long run of numerous personal interactions. Branding enhancement within an array of basic principles may be constructively versatile but shifting core values depending on the topic of discussion, is rather an indication of inconsistency. This sort of inconsistency is harmful for the personalisation of online interactions and for the feeling of trust and inclusion that constituents crave to experience during deliberation.

The creation of a brand personality stems from observing behaviour. Observing a MEPs behaviour online produces an image which facilitates the processing of information as a shortcut to decision making. It is both about identifying the issue and creating a feeling of belonging (Lilleker, 2015:112). A voter may not feel obliged to search for detailed information regarding specific policies, once the representative's brand is linked to those policies. When behavioural patterns are recognised, relationship building becomes stronger and based upon the style and the content of the communication, voter's matching of preferences may become an easier task.

As Lilleker (2015:113) implies, Twitter can be used as an impression management tool and e-branding mechanism (also Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013:193-194). Twitter participants are by default less passive and twitter discussions offer the necessary elements that Simmons

(2007) views as vital for e-branding: actual data provided by voters, live two-way interactions, an individualised communication mechanism and personalised content. The interactivity taking place is crucial as it can enhance trust and ties with the political brand (Lilleker, 2015:115). The interactivity that takes place during Twitter exchanges, refers to the highest existing form of user interaction, which is public conversation between users co-creating content with producers.

Lilleker's content analysis of tweets produced by UK MPs from 2007 to 2010, reveal that their online presence is linked with personal image promotion at the local level. Interactivity and co-production of content from voters was moderate and accompanied by the MPs effort to promote a more human/less political side of their personality. This is due to the interpersonal relations created from individual communications online, which reinforce the promotion of a local friendly image. In general, Lilleker sees incumbent MPs as promoting their image as good politicians and human beings through a personalised brand rather than a party brand. For voters, online communication with web 2.0 is a means to evaluate MPs and create impressions about their profiles as receptive and responsive individuals (Lilleker, 2015:123-125).

For a branding strategy to be acceptable for the voter, representatives need to ensure that engagement with voters is unmediated, personal and generating options to choose from (no predetermined outcome). If online deliberation is bound to be unproductive due to lack of MEP flexibility, then consultation transforms into impression management and voters have nothing to gain (Smith, 2001:992). As Lilleker (2015:121) refers to Cain et al (1987), it becomes apparent that by having a greater than national MPs flexibility in their policy proposals, MEPs can promote a non-partisan approach to legislation and thus gain more from a personalised branding strategy towards their constituents.

When Jackson and Lilleker researched the influence of social networking on MP-constituency relations in Britain back in 2008, evidence demonstrated that MPs may use social networking for their image enhancement and the representation of their personality, rather than to formulate policies. Further research can reveal if representatives' motivation to use social networking refers to electoral, communicational or participatory intentions impacting representation practices.

The reversal of principal-agent theory is my suggestion to demonstrate how deliberation can overcome the danger of excessive branding and manipulation of preference formulation by the power-holding MEPs. In the traditional form, the voter is the principal who casts his vote and elects/delegates the MEP as an agent to represent him. The MEP once elected becomes the agent who works/promotes policies/legislates on behalf of the voter. The risk is that the MEP may undergo a branding process for self-promotion with educating initiatives aiming at formulating people's preferences to his interests. Once the term is over, principals (voters) use their vote to reward or punish agents (MEPs) for their performance.

In the reverse form, the incumbent MEP acts like a principal delegating voters with the responsibility to provide feedback and proposals. Voters acting as agents engage in the process of deliberation providing suggestions-preferences-proposals. The principals (MEPs) reward the agents (voters) in two manners: a) they reward all of the agents by educating them in a sincere and meaningful way during deliberation (without manipulation of their preferences) and b) they specifically reward those agents who had the best ideas, by adopting their proposals and promoting relevant legislation to the EP. Under this framework, MEPs cannot manipulate the education of voters according to their desires because they have to award them by promoting at least some of the original proposals.

The case of MEPs using an attractive online persona, branded upon a set of values relevant to their targeted audience is a case most likely to occur in Twitter interactions. MEPs have the unavoidable incentive to pursue promotion of their self-image. Politicians can be autonomous political brands and in fact MEPs will most probably try to promote their personal brand in the public domain of Twitter. This does not have to come at the cost of deliberation. By maintaining an engaging character during their Twitter endeavours, MEPs can externalise their true features, empowering their profile and gaining trust and support. As long as they have their real values incorporated in their message in a consistent way, they will be communicating their true identity without distorting twideliberation.

Conclusions: A case for further research

Further research should focus on discovering and exposing interpretations of MEPs and their constituents regarding a/ the impact of twideliberation on representative-constituent relation,

preference promotion, policy formulation and accountability of decision making and b/ the strategic-motivational scope of representatives to use social media for branding and promotion of self interest. The aim should be to discover and expose interpretations from MEPs and their virtual constituents on unmediated online interaction and their understanding of the potential of e-participation.

Two major research questions arise from this ambition:

1. **Demand Side:** Do citizens see twideliberation as a tool to construct preferences which MEPs will promote to introduce relevant policies? Do they consider receiving feedback from their MEPs as an enhanced accountability or as an educational effort with branding/marketing angles?
2. **Supply Side:** Do MEPs interpret e-participation primarily as a method to exercise political branding and promote their image to their constituents? Do they see themselves as claim receptors anticipating or even defining people's preferences as they see fit during an educational process?

By analysing in a comparative manner among European countries the process, intention and consequences of networked interaction between constituents and MEPs we should expect to: a/ determine the extent to which internet can curve a path towards direct reference to representation without party mediation, b/ establish if twideliberation is an alternative method for citizen embracement and re-inclusion and c/ examine whether it empowers citizens into auditing and legitimising political decision-making.

I see as preferable the choice of two countries to act as comparable cases that could produce valuable inferences based upon their different characteristics. An important feature related to EU politics is that values may differ between the composing member states. Cultural differences may jeopardise a comparative analysis if the compared states are not properly chosen (May, 2011:53). An example of chosen countries for data collection and analysis based upon differences rather than similarities could be UK and Greece:

UK has historically been sceptical to any major European steps towards further integration while Greece has always been pro-European. In relation to that, Greece as a step of further integration became a member of the Eurozone while UK has always been unwilling to adopt the common currency. UK is also representing the so called North of Europe, historically

consisting of countries with high degree of industrialisation as opposed to the European South of greater agricultural orientation. In this respect, the North-South division is basically a cultural division, in our case between the Anglo-Saxon and the Mediterranean culture. In political terms the difference is that UK is electing MEPs from defined territories-constituencies while Greece has one single constituency (where MEPs were previously elected from a closed party-list and for the first time in the 2014 EP elections with individual preference vote). Interestingly enough voting in Greece is compulsory for National elections and optional for European elections, whereas in UK it is optional in both cases. The levels of abstaining in Greece are usually low to medium (40% in 2014) while in the UK are far larger (65% in 2014). On the other hand they are both countries undergoing a form of financial crisis, much harder for Greece of course. Also the financial crisis becomes a vehicle of disintegration crisis as UK prepares for a Referendum to potentially exit the EU, while Greece might have to exit the Eurozone as a result of its disagreement to the austerity policies inflicted by the European authorities to deal with the huge debt.

Further research should pursue an interpretive approach combining qualitative elite in-depth interviews of MEPs and focus groups or surveys among Twitter users from UK and Greece, to spot how cultural, ideological and experiential characteristics of MEPs alter the perception of twideliberation. The aim is to discover the perceptions of MEPs and their constituents on online unmediated interaction and to interpret their understanding on the potential of social networking for political participation.

As most of the studies so far have been of a quantitative nature measuring the frequency, quantity or statistical significance of online interactions, the perspective should be an 'insider view' (Mason, 2002) studying the subjective meanings that MEPs and voters attach to their experience of twideliberation. Trying to capture the individual 'stories' of MEPs from an interpretive angle regarding their response to e-participation, should delimit a context in which MEPs take executive decisions about the formulation of policies. Using the participants' views, meanings and understandings as the primary source of data is the key to define incentives (Mason, 2002:56).

By interpreting their perception towards an increasing SN interaction, further research will determine the level of MEP willingness to use internet as a branding tool. At the same time it will measure constituents' perceptions of direct communication with MEPs outside party

boundaries, as a new means of political inclusion. My intention is to understand from the viewpoint of the participants how they construct the process of e-interaction and if this alters the existing patterns of political representation.

The use of social networks for online deliberation and formulation of policies at the individual level is not a threat to representative democracy. It may seem as a first step towards a future of direct individualistic interactions from a distance, deliberation 'from the self', decision making on the spot and partisan irrelevance. On the contrary though, it facilitates the accountability of representative actions in a proactive way and promotes citizen re-inclusion into political affairs, both of which are at the core of the democratic function. We are still quite far from a virtual democracy of once-an-hour mini decision-making smartphone referendums. This is not due to technological constraints but because of our natural tendency to approach democratic traditions with sanctity and respect to the millennia-lasting processes of political interactions. Things do change and technology facilitates this change at an unprecedented pace.

With reference to the representatives, it may seem like a transformation of their role and an extra burden with the addition of a virtual constituency to serve among their other duties. In fact this is an expansion of their audience outside the physical boundaries of their constituency with promising results for the promotion of their national persona. Furthermore, it is the opportunity to interact with a part of the society already committed to political engagement, willing to productively contribute to the formulation of policies. Whether this engagement is overshadowed by the incentive to brand an attractive image or if their educational role becomes a manipulative process to define specific preferences, it is yet to be revealed through further empirical study.

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