The pursuit of legitimacy as a key driver for public engagement: the European Parliament case

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Abstract: Political disengagement and declining trust have become main areas of concern for parliaments in Europe, leading to a considerable reinforcement of public engagement activities. The European Parliament is a prime example of an institution where the need to strengthen the link with citizens became a key priority, in particular following the Lisbon Treaty's reinforcement of the parliament's powers and visibility. This article analyses the decision-making processes this Parliament has put in place to meet the public engagement agenda. It is mainly based on elite interviews with officials and representatives. We show that political will was key to move forward the public engagement agenda, and that new media has become a core element of this strategy.

Key words: public engagement; trust in parliament; European Parliament; internet and parliament.

Faced with rising levels of political disengagement and accusations of lack of transparency, parliaments across Europe have considerably reinforced their public engagement activities over the last decade, with many embedding this dimension into their overall strategies. As parliamentary public engagement has grown, the literature has started to analyse the effectiveness of the outputs produced by parliaments, such as petition systems or simply parliamentary websites. Namely, studies have assessed over a decade now the effectiveness of parliamentary websites as a public engagement tool, in the possibilities of information and interaction these offer (Norris, 2001; Trechsel et al, 2003; Setälä and Grönlund, 2006; Global Centre for ICT, 2008, 2010; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Joshi and Rosenfield, 2013), with many more studies focusing on the effectiveness of individual MPs' websites (e.g. Zittel, 2003; Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2006; Vicente-Merino, 2007; Francoli and Ward, 2008; Jackson, 2008). In this article we propose instead to analyse the processes in place that lead to the decisions behind public engagement outputs, such as a parliamentary website. Adopting the European Parliament as our case study, we explore the processes in place to support the development of public engagement and its inherent challenges. Whilst some of the literature has considered the structures in place to move forward the engagement agenda (Kelso, 2007; Leston-Bandeira, 2007b; De Rosa, 2009; Clark and Wilford, 2012; Walker 2012), we still need to understand better what processes lead to the development of public engagement, to ascertain who takes decisions regarding the format of public

engagement, the inherent challenges and what this can teach us in terms of developing effective public engagement. It is important in particular to identify the challenges in place to be able to set realistic expectations; but also to identify enablers of effective implementation of public engagement.

Focusing on the output of a parliamentary website, we enquire into the decision-making process in place behind the decisions made in relation to its format and content. We choose the European Parliament as our case study, as one where issues of legitimacy and trust have been particularly patent and one where the public engagement agenda has been particularly strong. Besides this, due to its size and incredible diversity, this Parliament offers an interesting case study to ascertain the difficulties that parliamentary structures can raise. Our research shows the important role played by the Bureau as a motivator for change, exploring also how the units responsible for public engagement outputs relate to the rest of the European Parliament's services. We see that the high levels of autonomy enjoyed by some units and the considerable investment on very specific areas of public engagement – web communication – have led to the development of innovative public engagement tools such as the Parliament's Facebook page. We also show, though, that this does not necessarily reflect the full reality of parliamentary business.

We start the article by outlining the challenges that the public engagement agenda have brought to parliaments. Our first section considers the implementation of public engagement by parliaments and the role played by parliamentary websites in the wider engagement agenda. We then consider what makes parliaments an institution destined to be unloved, especially in the case of the EP. We then proceed to analyse how the public engagement agenda has developed in the EP and identify the quest for legitimacy as a key draw to develop public engagement activities. We are then able to explore the processes in place in the EP to support the development of public engagement, and to, in our last section, consider the significant role that social media have acquired in the EP's engagement strategy.

The article is based on primary research comprising mainly in-depth interviews with representatives and senior parliamentary officials in the European Parliament, complemented by documentary and website analysis. This study is part of a wider project that also includes four other parliaments (British House of Commons, French National Assembly, Portuguese Assembly of the Republic and Scottish Parliament). The project includes 55 in-depth elite interviews undertaken with representatives with a responsibility for parliament management and with parliamentary officials, mainly senior, with responsibility for the management of public engagement tools, such as website and visits, but also officials working in areas of parliamentary core businesses, such as committee

clerks. The interviews were carried out in confidence and are therefore dealt with anonymously. Although we focus mainly on the material relating to the EP in this article, the research carried out in the other parliaments has informed our analysis of the EP's primary data.

The implementation of public engagement by parliaments

Over the last decade the issue of trust in politics has become increasingly important for parliaments in western democracies. In a climate of so-called increased political apathy, often harnessed on low vote turnout rates, many show that the public is not interested in politics and that political institutions do not engage with the public (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007). As core representative political institutions, parliaments are often put at the centre of this debate, being show-cased as the face and cause of declining engagement with politics. Labelled as the public face of political disengagement, this has in fact led many parliaments to take upon as their responsibility to promote citizens' engagement with politics (Hansard Society, 2012; Inter-Parliamentary Union(IPU), 2012; Leston-Bandeira 2012). Across Europe, and elsewhere, parliaments have reinforced their mechanisms of contact with citizens and public engagement has become a core element of parliamentary strategic planning. In the UK this is clear in all of its devolved assemblies, as well as Westminster (Kelso, 2007; Carman, 2009; Clark and Wilford, 2012; Walker, 2012) and the recent IPU report on representation demonstrates that this trend is global (2012). The public engagement agenda has become a key driver for parliaments, with considerable resources being dedicated to the expansion of the services and activities supporting it, in particular, but not only, through the use of the internet. In some cases public engagement has expanded almost to the point of developing into a new parliamentary role. The European Parliament (EP) is a prime example where public engagement has become a key policy driver; seeing its size and the challenges it faces in terms of legitimacy, this is a particularly interesting case to study on this matter.

Whilst it has become a major concern and activity for parliaments, we still know little about how parliaments have implemented the public engagement agenda, its effectiveness and in particular the processes through which these activities are shaped. We know from surveys focused on parliamentary public engagement that the public has a general lack of knowledge (and interest) about parliament, as well as that increased levels of knowledge lead to increased levels of interest for the institution (Hansard Society 2010, 2011a; Clark and Wilford, 2012). We know little, however, about the actual impact that parliamentary public engagement activities have on the public's perception of parliament. This is beyond the remit of this article. Instead, we focus on what we can

learn from the processes managing the implementation of public engagement, and specifically a parliamentary website.

Public engagement covers a very wide range of outlets and activities with different purposes from information to participation in public policy. These lead to different experiences of engagement and, arguably, different steps in a more general process of engagement with politics. Whilst we focus on the decision-making process managing parliamentary websites, we do not claim this to be the only or strongest public engagement outlet; it is simply an important outlet in the first step of public engagement: information to the public. The process of public engagement with parliament encompasses, however, different steps. The Hansard Society establishes a framework for engagement with two overarching processes: first the education process through which individuals obtain information and understanding about parliament, then the participation through which citizens actually participate in parliamentary matters (2011b: 46). Carman distinguishes four steps in a wider process that eventually leads to the integration of "the citizenry into legitimisation of law": information transmission and provision, information exchange, public participation and public control (2009: 37). And Walker identifies the lack of knowledge on parliament as the first challenge that public engagement has to face; followed by openness of the institution and finally the individual's perception that parliament is relevant to them (2012: 272-276). There are clearly different forms of public engagement and different steps along an overarching process. We identify five steps in the process of public engagement with parliament:

1. **Information**: citizens have access to information about parliament;
2. **Understanding**: citizens engage with this information developing an understanding of parliament (the understanding can be at its simplest form, such as recognising the difference between legislature and executive);
3. **Identification**: citizens not only understand parliament, but can also see its relevance and are able to link parliamentary activity to their own lives and experiences;
4. **Participation**: citizens do not only understand parliament's relevance to their lives, they actually feel compelled to participate in a parliamentary output to act on an area that matters to them;
5. **Intervention**: citizens not only participate, but they also lead the process and engage with parliamentarians in the discussion that contributes to a parliamentary decision.

A parliamentary website may have limited potential for the fifth step, but it plays a considerable role in at least the first stage. Numerous studies show that, despite accessibility

differences, the internet has played a key role in opening parliaments up, in particular in providing information which otherwise would be extremely difficult to find (Norris, 2001; Setälä and Grönlund, 2006; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira, 2012). As the 2010 Audit of Political Engagement shows, whilst "the internet does not generally cause someone to be interested in politics" or affect their motivation, it can lower "the barriers to participation" (Hansard Society, 2010: 83). Still in the UK, there is also evidence that the internet is the public's main source of information about parliament (for 73%), clearly overtaking traditional media (Hansard Society, 2011b:13-14). The Global Centre for ICT and the IPU reports confirm the key role played by the internet and websites, in particular, to foster engagement with legislatures across the world (Global Centre for ICT, 2008 and 2010; IPU, 2012). The ability to provide for detailed, accurate and timely information about parliament can contribute towards a development along the different steps of the process of public engagement. As Clark and Wilford show in their detailed analysis of public engagement in Northern Ireland, awareness of parliament as an institution is a paramount foundation for engagement (2012: 382). Carman also shows the importance of reinforcing awareness of the petitions system in Scotland, to galvanise on the potential of this engagement tool, demonstrating that individuals with knowledge about petitions were more likely to view these positively (2009: 27).

Different tools may therefore suit different steps of the engagement process. Likewise, these can have varying consequences according to the way they are implemented. Some public engagement activities may indeed result in a reinforced belief in the importance of parliament and in effective engagement with politics, whilst some may be little more than a gimmick. One important consideration is whether public engagement actually reflects parliament's work, or whether it develops as a parallel activity, both of which depend largely on how these activities are developed and the extent to which they are integrated with parliament's overall work. Whilst a wealth of studies have focused on the features of specific outputs of public engagement, such as new media and petitions (for example, Setälä and Grönlund, 2006; Dai and Norton, 2007; Carman, 2009, 2010; Fox, 2009; Miller, 2009; Joshi and Rosenfield, 2013), we know little about the actual process of implementation of public engagement activities. And yet, the process of implementation can be as important for the suitability of a public engagement output, as it may shape its format and contents. This is particularly important when it comes to information and communication tools, as these bring added challenges to the way parliaments operate and take decisions (Olesen et al, 2006: 6; Leston-Bandeira, 2007a: 657-658).[1]

[1] More generally, Bellamy and Taylor show clearly how information and communication technology tools impact on political institutions' organisation and modus of operandi (1998).

Deriving from this, we also still know little about the challenges the public engagement agenda raises to parliaments. Drawing its legitimacy from its representative nature, whereby the public is represented by its members, parliaments are not necessarily a prime forum for a direct engagement with the public; ultimately that is not what parliaments do. Representatives engage with the public, parliaments provide for the means for representatives to develop their activity. And yet it is up to the institution of parliament to deliver the public engagement agenda, with institutions such as the UK parliament being under particular pressure to develop a more public oriented praxis (Kelso, 2007; Hansard Society, 2011b; Walker, 2012). Parliament's unique characteristics as an institution make it particularly difficult for the development of connections with citizens, as pointed out by Hedlund already back in 1985: "the nature of the legislative organisation and its difficulties in projecting a dynamic and active image have weakened it in the public's eyes" (Hedlund, 1985: 357). In an era of 24/7 information, those difficulties are considerably amplified. And yet, public engagement is often seen as an important path towards restoring trust and strengthening parliament's legitimacy (Fox, 2009): by providing multiple points of access to parliament, transparent information and possibilities to engage with policy making, citizens would develop a better understanding and a more positive perception of parliament. With the latest Audit of Political Engagement in the UK showing an increase in perceived knowledge about parliament (Hansard Society, 2011a: 61), one could enquiry whether this is the result of parliamentary public engagement activities. We are still uncertain about the extent to which public engagement does result in raised levels of trust,[2] but for now we can understand how the decision-making processes that underpin parliamentary public engagement shape its outputs.

In this study we focus on the decision-making processes that shape the output of a parliamentary website: who, and how, is involved in decisions relating to the content of a parliamentary website? Are the contents of a parliamentary website the realm of a highly technical team? Is it in fact managed by parliamentary clerks? Do politicians have a say on the format and contents of a parliamentary website? Who decides on a website's priorities? To what extent are decisions relating to a parliamentary website integrated with the rest of parliamentary business? And what are the key impetus for investment on public engagement? Parliaments have bicephalous management structures and leadership: on one hand they are imminently political institutions and therefore representatives play a management and leadership role; on the other, impartiality and continuity need to prevail and therefore the administrative body also plays an important role in leadership and management. As Winetrobe put it "what is unique about a parliament compared

[2] Except for petitions, where Carman's study of the Scottish petitions system showed that perceptions of a fair process to consider petitions can lead to increased levels of institutional trust (2010).

with other institutions, is that all [its] tasks involve both its (temporary) political and the (permanent) official communities" (2003: 3). The balance and autonomy between the political and administrative strands vary greatly from parliament to parliament, as does consequently the extent to which political leadership is involved in administrative decisions. As the public face of parliaments, their websites are a prime public engagement tool and it is therefore important to understand how decisions are made in relation to its format and contents. We hypothesize that the more autonomy the web team has, the more effective the parliamentary website will be, though the more difficult it will be to integrate with parliamentary business. We also expect that an effective parliamentary website requires an institutional strategy and mandate, in line with other studies on public engagement (Kelso, 2007; Global Centre for ICT, 2008; Carman 2009; Clark and Wilford, 2012; Walker 2012).

As an institution particularly questioned in terms of its legitimacy and role, the EP is a prime example where the public engagement agenda has become a key priority; in particular following the Treaty of Lisbon and the reinforcement of its co-legislative role, which have accentuated the parliament's visibility. The EP presents therefore an interesting case study to explore the processes in place to implement public engagement.

Parliament – an institution destined to be unloved

Parliaments are full of paradoxes. On one hand they represent collectively all citizens' points of view, on the other individual citizens do not identify themselves with the parliament collectively. Parliaments should be the political institution closest to the public, but they are often the most difficult for the public to engage with. They are the most political institution, and yet they have to be portrayed in a non-political fashion in order to respect all political allegiances. They are often the most criticised political institution, but they do not have a single spokesperson to defend them; as Kelso put it 'while parties and governments have clear leaders who speak for them, Parliament does not' (2007: 369). Parliaments combine a number of characteristics that make them particularly difficult institutions to defend. In a context of public discourse that reinforces the idea of voter apathy and mistrust of politicians, and where parliaments have come to personify all that is bad about politics, they have also become a key institution to defend (Flinders, 2010; Flinders and Kelso, 2011; Riddell, 2011). But the fact that they are highly visible, accountable and collective institutions make them particularly vulnerable institutions in terms of public image, which has consequences into the development of public engagement activities.

As the most public of our institutions, parliaments are highly exposed, with most meetings held openly, proceedings and minutes published, details of its members freely available, and personifying the key issues of political combat. This visibility increased once parliamentary proceedings started being broadcast, but the advent of the internet has led to an exponential increase of this visibility raising significant new challenges. The EP is a very good example of this, being one of the first parliaments to web stream all of its sessions online and to give access to all documents online, in an array of different languages demonstrating a strong commitment for transparency. However, as Thompson has shown, this increased visibility leads to added challenges to maintain legitimacy (2000), particularly when it is a contested legitimacy as many argue is the case of the EP (Goetze and Rittberger, 2010). Combined with being highly visible, parliaments are also accountable to all; each voter contributed to parliament, each voter expects to know what happens there; each voter has a sense of ownership of the institution and feels they have a say about what parliament should be doing. Parliament's accountability is irrefutable and very clearly expressed every five years at election time.

Combined with these two characteristics comes the third one of a collective nature, which has two consequences: lack of a single identity and the inevitability of causing disagreement. There is no single institutional voice that speaks for parliament, which is a composite of different actors: political groups and representatives. Every time a representative speaks, some citizens will not agree with them; every time a political group acts, they will be expressing a partial view and many citizens will be critical. Parliaments are forums providing for the expression of differing factions. These factions often have contradictory agendas and may actually compete with the institution itself. This collective nature is particularly patent in the EP where to the varied political ideologies we must add an extraordinary mix of languages, nationalities and cultures, and where a considerable number of MEPs' agendas are defined in opposition to the very notion of a European Union parliament. The combination of visibility, accountability and a collective nature make parliaments institutions destined to be unloved: they are likely to be criticised and particularly vulnerable to this criticism, because no single actor defends them. The management of the public image of any parliament is therefore challenging, to say the least; in the EP, this challenge is considerably amplified.

Besides presenting these three characteristics, specific features deriving from the EP's uniqueness make this a particularly difficult institution to defend and one, therefore, where public engagement is perceived as particularly important. Unlike national parliaments, the EP derives from an incremental and contested legitimacy. It is also a multilingual parliament to a unique level where each member state's language must be represented. This means working daily with 23 official

languages, with translation of all parliamentary documents into these languages but also interpreting of parliamentary proceedings into those languages. Every MEP is entitled to speak in their own language, all EU citizens are entitled to engage with the Parliament in their own language. The EP's multilingualism has considerable impact on everything the Parliament does (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, 2011: 41-8), not only politically but also organisationally, raising considerable challenges unforeseen in other European parliaments. Associated with this comes its multinational character, which again has extensive consequences for the parliament's organisation. In addition, the Parliament is spread across three different locations (Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg) and geographically considerably distant from the vast majority of EU citizens. Finally, this is a particularly large parliament: with 754 representatives and over 6,000 officials (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, 2011: 219), making it the largest elected parliament in Europe. These characteristics explain why this is a highly complex institution, not only politically but also administratively. The management of its image and public engagement activity are therefore particularly challenging, an issue that has acquired reinforced importance with the Lisbon Treaty. The Treaty has brought higher visibility to the Parliament, which in turn has accentuated the need for accountability.

Pursuing public engagement to harness legitimacy

From a small club of politicians in the 1950s to today's large institution directly elected and with considerably reinforced powers, the EP's visibility has increased with each strengthening of its powers and legitimacy. With the Treaty of Lisbon's strengthening of its co-legislative powers, came therefore a reinforcement of its exposure and a more acute need to justify its legitimacy. In a widespread context of perceived voter apathy, in particular in relation to EU institutions, the agenda of public engagement acquired therefore particular importance at the end of the 2000s. This is clear across national parliaments in Europe, but particularly patent in the EP.

Following the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and the commitment for its enforcement for the EP's new mandate, the European Parliament elections of June 2009 became a key target for this institution as expectations rose in relation to its strengthened role (Schuck et al, 2011). The final enforcement of the Treaty was all but certain, with the referendum in Ireland still to happen, and the elections were prepared under considerable uncertainty. But rather than devaluing the elections, the shadow of the Lisbon Treaty made these elections particularly significant. The value of these elections lay in its significance towards legitimising a new Parliament with more powers. It became a key moment for the Parliament's planning.

This is clear in the re-organisation of the Parliament's services and in the considerable investment on expanding ways to reach out to citizens; all of these with a direct focus on improving voter turnout at the 2009 elections. Our interviews show that the measure of voter turnout has become an essential indicator of the Parliament's success, or otherwise, to connect with the public. Although many have shown that reasons for the fluctuation of voter turnout are well beyond the parliament's performance (Hix and Marsh, 2007; Marsh 2011; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Seeber and Steinbrecher, 2011), and more to do with systemic institutional traits that make it less likely to compel citizens to vote, such as the absence of a direct link to the formation of an EU government (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, 2011; Jones, 2011), let alone parliament's public engagement activities, voter turnout was consistently referred to by officials as the ultimate proof when it comes to evaluating if their work has been successful; this is particularly noticeable in the officials working in the Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM). Likewise, all efforts are now focused on the 2014 elections. In the couple of years preceding the 2009 election, the EP became clearly focused on the need to build stronger bridges with citizens, as shown by the annual activity reports of the Parliament's Directors-General, which among others show considerable financial investment in this area (EP, 2008; EP, 2009a). And, as has happened elsewhere in Europe, new media was identified as a key tool to deliver this agenda. As one of our interviewees explained: *'(…) with the boost that we got from the elections which gave us a modest budget and, more importantly, a good deal of political impetus and momentum to do something new and really try to break down this communications gap. Everyone was in a bit of a state about how the turnout was looking and the early polls were showing it could be 34% and people were just terrified of that happening. At the same time, we had Obama in America [with a successful use of new media]. And MEPs and the authorities here were saying "that's what we want, we want some of that Obama magic over here for the election"'*[3]. Reinforcing the links with citizens became therefore a key political and administrative aim in the couple of years preceding the 2009 elections to the EP.

Partly as a consequence of the Union's enlargement, but partly also because of the importance given to public engagement, the EP's services have expanded and undergone significant changes in this area. A new Directorate General was created in 2008 for the portfolio of Innovation and Technical Support (DG ITEC), with responsibility for the support of all technological equipment associated with parliamentary work, but also crucially with a specific remit to support the DG COMM in the development of technologically based applications. As the EP's website explains, the DG COMM '*works to ensure that information is circulated to the public, the media and opinion leaders*

[3] Official, (2010, December), European Parliament, Interview with the author.

on the wide range of Parliament's activities'[4]. It includes a wide range of services from visits to the Parliament, relationship with the media and the information offices in the member states. The DG COMM has expanded considerably since the mid 2000s, as new areas of responsibility were added or developed. In the period between 2007 and 2009 a number of changes occurred specifically focused on strengthening public engagement. Examples of this include the creation of the Web Communications Unit in 2007 and of the Directorate for Relations with Citizens in 2009. The inclusion of the Public Opinion Unit in this Directorate also indicates the importance given to monitor very closely the public's views and reactions to the EP. This expansion and reinforcement of the services working on public engagement shows the EP's commitment to this area of activity.

Linked to this expansion and re-organisation of services, the EP developed a massive programme of public engagement activities from the ambitious and unique EuroparlTV (a multi-channel TV chain that broadcasts over the internet) to the development of campaigns focused on raising voter turnout during the 2009 election,[5] or the expansion of the communications capacity of the EP's website, unequalled amongst other parliaments in Europe, which has involved significant financial and staff investment. The extent of these activities reflects a very clear mandate given by the EP's Bureau to strengthen links with citizens, ultimately with a view of improving the understanding and acceptance of the institution, and encouraging more participation from citizens.

Although always particularly important for the EP, at the end of the first decade of the new millennium the public engagement agenda became therefore a major drive of the EP's activities and decision-making, giving a very clear mandate and power to specific services to gear the relationship between the EP and the public. As we shall see, this drive has resulted in innovative initiatives, but has also been punctuated by a divorce from the parliament's core parliamentary activity.

Managing the public engagement agenda

In such a large, complex and diverse institution, decision-making and implementation of policies face considerable difficulties, namely in terms of coordination of activities and conciliation of interests.

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[4] European Parliament, *Directorate-General for Communication*, Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00d7a6c2b2/Secretariat.html?tab=eParliament_secretariat_dgcomm (last accessed 27 March 2012).

[5] See, for example, the vimeo videos and other campaign activity targeting specifically voter turnout summarised on the following: Web Com, *Online Communication Campaign for European Parliament Elections 2009*, Available at: http://vimeo.com/7773139 (last accessed 27 march 2012).

This affects all of parliament, but we focus here on the bodies and services that have pushed for and delivered the public engagement agenda: the Bureau and the Directorate Generals (DGs).

The Bureau is representative of the type of conciliation and coordination at the basis of decision-making in the EP, seen by many as a consensus institution (Settembri and Neuhold, 2009; Westlake, 1994). The Bureau decides on all administrative, staff and organisational matters (EP, 2009b: at.23) and although in many parliaments this type of body exists essentially to ratify administrative decisions, this is far from the case in the EP. Composed by 14 MEPs who act as Vice-Presidents (plus five more as Quaestors, members on an advisory capacity), the Bureau's membership reflects Parliament's political composition, with political groups represented in proportion to their size in parliament, conciliated with a carefully managed representation of the EU's 27 member states. Each Vice-President has responsibility for one of the Bureau's portfolios, which are allocated through negotiation between the political groups. Parliaments' administrative authorities often have no, or little, political input, although they take decisions that impact on parliamentary activity. Contrary to the British House of Commons' administrative political authority, the Commission, each EP Vice-President has significant responsibility for their specific portfolio, being involved in considerable detail in the administrative policies being decided upon; a first indicator that political will matters in the EP's admin decisions. The application of the Bureau's decisions is done by the ten Directorate-Generals (DGs) that make up the Parliament's Secretariat. Each DG comes under the responsibility of a specific Vice-President. The Bureau is also responsible for nominating officials at the higher levels of Directors and Directors-General, which means that 'political factors play a significant role' (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, 2011: 222) in the parliament's administration even if nationality, seniority and ability are also considered.

Together, the Bureau and the DGs are therefore well representative of the EP's extensive conciliation of a myriad of interests into single bodies. But this also shows that the political input into the administrative management of the EP is considerable. As our interviewees confirmed, although most decisions taking place in the Bureau are politically uncontroversial, politics does play a part, with the main political groups having pre-Bureau group meetings to coordinate action. Likewise, the papers prepared by the DGs for the Bureau are discussed first with the respective Vice-President, and each Vice-President is expected to present, or at least lead, their papers. Having a mandate from the Bureau is therefore essential to develop policies within the Parliament.

In the 2009 elections run-up, there were serious concerns that vote turnout would be particularly low and that this would have consequences for the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and to the legitimacy of the Parliament's renewed powers. In this context, it is therefore no

surprise that the public engagement agenda acquired so much importance, as this would have been a matter of particular importance for the political representatives in the Bureau. The DG COMM, responsible for most of the activities related to public engagement, was therefore given considerable leeway to develop initiatives to narrow the gap between citizens and the EP. As one official confirmed: '*In terms of autonomy, we had a great year in 2009 (...) because of the atmosphere at the time it was remarkably easy. We (…) were getting yes's for answers*.'[6] This is in stark contrast with other parliaments in Europe where the authorities have resisted such staunch investment in public engagement. Here, those taking decisions – Vice-Presidents(MEPs) – were a prime stakeholder in the equation of public engagement.

Since then the management of this agenda has stayed with the DG COMM, with the Bureau keeping a close eye on developments, but with considerable autonomy of decision-making given to the DG COMM to deliver a better relationship with citizens, in particular to its Directorate for Media (DM), which amongst other includes the Press, the Web Communications and the Webmaster Units. And partly as a result of the way DGs are organised, there is a sense that the DM owns all matters to do with the relationship with citizens; and not, for instance, the Directorate for Relations with Citizens, as noted in our interviews. On one hand, the DM was effectively given the power to innovate, on the other they have delivered innovative outputs such as their use of Facebook, which as we shall see below is far more complex than other parliaments' use of social media. This mandate on the DM does also mean that public engagement is essentially focused on media tools, rather than say outreach activities such as in the UK. It is therefore up to the DM to liaise with other sections of the EP to understand what is happening, what initiatives may be taking place in committees, what major events may be happening in Parliament, etc and to communicate these to the public; this is never an easy task in a parliament, but in the EP it is particularly challenging seeing its size and diversity.

The interviews showed that each DG is so large that there is considerable detachment between these. When interviewing officials from different DGs there is a clear sense that each DG is a mini, separate, institution, often with a different culture and noticeably focused on their own activity, of their DG, rather than the EP overall. As one Vice-President put it to us, '*turf wars between DGs*'[7] are often a major reason for delay in the Bureau's progress. Contact between DGs tends to happen at the very top, at the level of the Directors of the DGs, and not at the level of most officials who deliver the EP's day-to-day agenda. This contrasts greatly, for instance, with smaller institutions such as the Portuguese or the Scottish parliament, where there is much more direct communication

[6] Official, (2010, December), European Parliament, Interview with the author.
[7] Representative, (2010, December), European Parliament, Interview with the author.

between services across different levels of responsibility. Each DG in the EP acts unilaterally, despite the many meetings to represent all interests and services of the parliament, it is just not practical or possible to follow up the needs of all services. One simple, but illustrative, example of this difficulty to represent the Parliament's plethora of interests and activities is the Parliament's home webpage. Whilst interviews in the Web Communications and the Webmaster Units highlighted the difficulty to select what to portray on that front page, officials from other services expressed their disappointment with the fact that they were not represented adequately on the home page. The DM runs weekly meetings with representatives from most DGs and communication of needs and activities are passed on vertically within each DG, and then communicated to the DM in those meetings, along a silo structure. Whilst this process does not differ substantially from how other parliaments act on this matter, the EP's size (and diversity of cultures) makes the process far more top driven than in other parliaments. This process leads to a natural selection of what matters most, leaving little space for detailed matters. As a consequence, it is ultimately up to the DM to make the key decisions, in particular in terms of what matters for the Parliament's public engagement agenda. As one committee clerk put it, *'there are a lot of empires in this institution'*,[8] referring to their frustration in publicising their activities to the public. Partly thanks to their success in delivering, partly due to the Bureau's aspiration for greater understanding and interest from the public for the EP, the DM has become the key body managing this Parliament's relationship with citizens, together with the other DG COMM's services.

Developing public engagement through social media

Since the start of the new millennium parliaments across Europe have diversified considerably their activities specifically focused in reaching out to citizens. We have seen the development of innovative initiatives such as the Scottish parliament's Festival of Politics[9] or the Northern Ireland's Road shows (Clark and Wilford, 2012: 387), the growth of Education services in parliaments, the proliferation of Visitors Centres[10] and, more noticeably, the expansion of online tools (Global Centre for ICT, 2010). This development brings all sorts of difficulties for parliaments though, in terms of how to integrate the parliament's political voice into activities that are delivered and managed by an

[8] Committee Clerk, (2011, May), European Parliament, Interview with the author.
[9] www.festivalofpolitics.org.uk/Index.htm, last accessed 2 July 2012.
[10] See the development of the European Euroscola, the French Children's Parliament, the Portuguese Schools Programme, or the much enhanced Education service of the Houses of Parliament. See also the new Visitors Centres of the Danish, European and Swedish parliaments, or the Houses of Parliament's plans for a new Visitors Centre.

administrative body; in particular when the activity goes beyond informing the public, to engaging the public in a discussion. In this context, the EP has been one of the most innovative parliaments in Europe in its use of social media. The extent to which this has resulted in improvements of the Parliament's image, or in reaching out beyond the usual public who listens to European affairs, remains to be seen and does not fall within the remit of this article.

Besides conferring a mandate to the DGCOMM to develop a public engagement strategy, the Bureau specifically endorsed the use of social media tools at the centre of this strategy as demonstrated by the Web Strategy it adopted in October 2010.[11] By social media we refer to online platforms that encourage interaction between the producer of the content and the public; instead of a static website that provides information, with a one-way channel of communication. Social media aim to provide for a two-way channel of communication, seen by many as a panacea to foster political participation (Coleman, and Blumler, 2008; Lilleker, and Jackson, 2010). The most well known social media tools are Facebook and Twitter, but also include other such as Flickr and YouTube. Whilst some parliaments have started using these tools, the EP has been much more pro-active and innovative, in particular in its use of Facebook.

One of the difficulties parliaments face in using these tools is that they should remain neutral, a recurrent theme throughout all of our interviews with officials and clerks across all five parliaments.[12] Engaging into a political dialogue with citizens is therefore a risky move for any parliament, as they may be accused of impartiality towards specific policies or political groups. As one of the Hansard Society's reports states, "we note that agreeing an 'institutional voice' for social media channels is an issue for Parliament" (2011b: 55). But the EP has done exactly that: develop a Facebook account to such extent that officials are able to enter into a dialogue with citizens about the Parliament's activities, whilst keeping neutrality. They have also created enough momentum to ascribe dynamism to the page, leading to continuing activity on the page; the more dynamic, relevant and up-to-date the page is, the more likely the public will follow it and contribute to discussions. One reason why this is possible is the allocation of a team of editors who are responsible for editing the Facebook EP page.

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[11] European Parliament, *Note to Members of the Bureau- Renewal of the Web Presence of the European Parliament*, PE 447.025/BUR, 20 October 2010.

[12] And demonstrated by parliamentary officials who attended the ECPRD (European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation) – *Parliaments on the Net IX Seminar*, Brussels, May 2011. Amongst over 80 officials from 16 different parliaments, only a very small majority had introduced social media tools and considerable apprehension was expressed in relation to its effective use by parliaments. The same concerns were also found in the *World e-Parliament Conference 2010*, Johannesburg, October 2010, which included about 400 delegates from over 80 countries from around the world.

The investment on web communication came in 2008, when the Web Communications Unit was created; this Unit has 22 editors who write for web-based pages and tools, representing each an official language, but each also with a specific area of responsibility.[13] According to our interviews, the Facebook page is the responsibility of five editors. The number of editors that the EP is able to dedicate to these tools is considerably higher than what happens in other parliaments; the UK Parliament's Facebook page, for instance, is edited by one member of staff and this constitutes only a small part of their job.[14] As a result of the continuity and dynamism given to the page, the EP can boast having a considerably high number of members (likes) of their Facebook page: over 371,000 by March 2012. As a contrast, the UK Parliament's Facebook page had 10,546 by the 27 of March 2012. The ratio by member state brings the EP's numbers to an average of 13,740 likes per member – which is still higher than the UK page;[15] plus, considering the standard indicators of access and use of internet, one would expect the average for the UK to be higher.[16] But more than the actual number of members, it is the way this page is utilised to embody discussion with citizens that is worth noting. This is only possible thanks to the staff resources involved.

What is more, the EP has again led the way in innovative use of social media by parliaments, having started in 2011 to integrate a dialogue between citizens and MEPs on their Facebook page. See, for example, the Chat with MEPs Feio and Goulard, 15 September 2011, on economic governance; citizens were able to put questions directly to these MEPs through a live chat tool embedded into the EP's Facebook page. The Chat resulted in 216 comments overall, 55 of which were answers from the MEPs. This was the first live chat with two MEPs at the same time, following eight other live chats with individual MEPs since March 2011.[17] Although the number of actual comments is very low in relation to population size, it is the integration of this political perspective that is worth noting, something that other parliaments have struggled to do. The integration of the political voice is an important element, however, of public engagement: the public engages with politics through politics, eg. through ideas and differing points of view. Plus, coming back to our

[13] Official, (2010, December), European Parliament, Interview with the author.

[14] Official, (2010, November), House of Commons. Interview with the author. What is more, this had not changed by January 2012, as re-confirmed to the author by the manager of the web team of the Houses of Parliament - Official, (2012, 3 January) E-mail message to the author.

[15] A ratio per population size still indicates a higher number for the EP (0.7389 per 1000 people; UK: 0.1689; according to population data in: European Commission, *Eurostat - Population Statistics*, available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables (last accessed 3 July 2012).

[16] For example: individuals' access to the internet in 2011 (EU: 67%; UK: 80%); Households with access to the internet in 2011 (EU: 67%; UK: 80%) European Commission, *Eurostat Information Society Statistics*, available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/information_society/data/main_tables (last accessed 3 July 2012) .

[17] http://www.facebook.com/europeanparliament?sk=app_188929731130869 (last accessed 19 September 2011).

process of public engagement, this is going beyond step one of information towards step four of participation.

The success of the Facebook account was explicitly referred to by several of our interviewees, including MEPs. Still, as one interviewee pointed out, 371,000 members is an impressive number, but '*even a mediocre newspaper has more readers*',[18] and it is in fact a minute fraction of the EU's population size. Plus, it may only be reaching those who are already engaged with the EP. And yet, some interviewees showed total confidence in the potential of this new tool in bridging the communication gap with citizens. Other interviews though expressed some unease in the way this tool is clearly owned by one Unit, not necessarily integrative of the work taking place elsewhere in parliament. Illustrative of this is the fact that other EP services have now created their own Facebook accounts, such as the EuroparlTV or the Committees on Petitions and on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

Whilst not disputing the effective way in which the Facebook tool has been developed, there is also a sense that it has been developed in a 'bubble' environment; one where communication is determined by one specific Unit (even if in consultation with other services), and one which is reaching a relative small audience, one that may well already be engaged with European affairs in any case. Besides this, whilst other parliaments have developed a wider array of public engagement activities, such as the UK parliamentary outreach programme or the year long French Children's Parliament, the EP has identified social media as its core focus for public engagement. This is not to say that social media has been the EP's only public engagement activity by any means – to note for example the new Visitors Centre (*Parlamentarium*) inaugurated in October 2011, destined to become a main hub for organising visits to the EP -, but it has been a dominant feature; in many ways an ideal means to reach citizens in such a widely geographically dispersed Union, though with obvious limitations also.

Conclusion

Trust and public engagement have become a top priority for parliaments in Europe, with the EP constituting a prime example of the importance of this agenda for its legitimacy. The Treaty of Lisbon has brought enhanced powers for the EP and, as a consequence, raised expectations and so the issue of legitimacy has become all the more important for this young institution. As the

[18] Official, (2011, May), European Parliament, Interview with the author. At the time of the interview the number of 'likes' was about 160.000.

institution's legitimacy and powers increased, so did its visibility, and so did its vulnerability. As a large institution, geographically dispersed, highly visible, accountable and with a collective nature, which encompasses considerable diversity of nationalities and cultures, the EP presents a number of characteristics which make it a particularly difficult parliament to portray to the public. And yet the EP has developed innovative public engagement activities, even if very specifically focused.

We saw that in the run-up to the EP 2009 elections, and in the shadow of the Lisbon Treaty's ratification, the public engagement agenda became a key driver for strategic planning in the EP; the quest to justify legitimacy became a key objective for parliamentarians. Political will affects administrative matters and MEPs were keen to see an improved image for the Parliament. Services were re-organised, considerable investments were made and autonomy given to the DG COMM to develop activities that would bridge the communication gap and hopefully lead to a higher voter turnout; the concerns raised by the possibility of a low turnout acted as a clear motivator for change. Indeed the EP shows us that political will can speed reforms even in naturally slow and bureaucratic institutions such as parliaments. Our research into the decision-making processes supporting public engagement in the EP also confirms that public engagement can only develop if there is an institutional mandate backing it. It also shows that effective public engagement requires considerable resources and financial investment, something not easy for parliaments to justify in a time of cuts.

Still, whilst this strategy was effective in producing innovative outputs such as the EP's Facebook page, it has not always resulted in a balanced integration of what officials often call 'the business', that is, day-to-day parliamentary work. There is a sense that communicating with the public is the domain of specific groups only. In many ways, this is inevitable in such a large and multi-faceted institution as the EP. The DG COMM has achieved, to some degree, to become the voice of the EP. In the process of doing so, however, it has to be selective of specific dimensions of the Parliament, the ones the public will listen to and not necessarily a thorough portray of what parliament does; a difficulty that is inherent to communicating with the public and one that will never totally fit what parliaments stand for. The EP shows the difficulties that parliaments face in presenting an institutional voice that reflects the political diversity and activity taking place within parliament.

It is still unclear the extent to which this public engagement agenda has in fact had any impact on the public's perceptions and understanding of the EP, or their willingness to participate in European politics. Overall, this remains an institution eager to justify its existence and the public engagement agenda is here to stay in the institution's pursuit of trust. As many other parliaments in

Europe, even if it has no real impact, the EP has to be seen as being transparent, accessible and engaging and our research shows that autonomy and political will are important components to produce innovative public engagement outputs.

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