eParticipation and online social networks: The case of the European Institutions

The advent of online social networks and their influence on Internet users has recently generated an interest in governments worldwide, as to their capabilities for enhancing social capital, triggering debate and deliberation, as well as keeping governance transparent and open. European Institutions have embraced these networks to disseminate a wide array of political information regarding Common Market policies and to stimulate awareness on the activities of the institutions. It therefore appears that the European Institutions are starting to connect with horizontal networks. Based on this development the paper discusses the result of a related survey that seeks to elucidate the use of online social networks by European Institutions in the context of eParticipation.

Keywords

eParticipation, social networks, European Institutions, social capital

“ A relevant survey on the use of online social networks by European Institutions reveals that Twitter is the preferred method of communication with the European public, followed by Facebook. Communication media, such as YouTube and Vimeo also attract European Institutions. ”
1. Introduction

The impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on politics has been a subject of academic scrutiny during the last decade. An important manifestation is eParticipation, which can help reinforce good governance, allow citizens to voice their views, form communities and participate in the decision-making process (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011).

The diffusion of the Internet, mobile communication, digital media and a variety of tools of social software have spurred the formulation of networks of interactive communication that connect people over distance and time (Castells, 2005), thus facilitating the rise of the networked society. A wide array of technologically-enabled services (SMS, blogs, podcasts, wikis, file sharing, etc.) have had an impact on the modus operandi of public administration and politics and have formulated the grounds for more openness, transparency and dialogue in public bodies. Online social networks are organised around users, enabling social relationships and information exchange, whilst online interactions have positive effects on community interaction, involvement and social capital.

At the same time, online social networks have been gaining in popularity, especially among young adults with their unprecedented capabilities for connection, interaction and formulation of networks that span across the Internet. According to Eurostat (2010), eight in ten young Internet users in the EU post messages to chat sites, blogs or social networking sites. This percentage is about 40 % in the age group 25-54 and less than 20 % in the age group 55-74. These trends reflect an increasing opportunity on how information and knowledge are exchanged, especially for social ends.

With the number of new profiles increasing exponentially in social networks, the growing interest by political organisations comes as no surprise. The popularity of social networks lies in the enabling potential to maintain a number of social ties without substantial cost or effort and to create larger networks out of which resources can be drawn (boyd, 2008). In response to the wide use of digital technologies and social networks, governments are starting to capitalise on these tools to communicate with the public, build digital communities and form communities (Mandarano et al., 2010).

The issue of eParticipation in European Institutions has been previously explored by the authors (Dalakiouridou et al., 2008, 2011; Smith 2009). In specific, a theoretical framework was created to assess eParticipation-related documents and initiatives. The general finding of more recent work was that the EU extensively used hierarchical governance modes and some emerging network elements so as to prepare the ground for informed public deliberation within the EU as the basis for further participation (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011). In practical terms, the EU targets citizens mostly by channelling information and demands vertically and in more weak manifestations by connecting networks horizontally.

The use of social networks can help us further conceptualise how online networks affect this previous categorisation by exploring the actual use of online social networks by European Institutions. It is not within the intention of this paper to further the work on equal grounds, but enhance our understanding of the use of social networks by political institutions. The notion of social networks is explored in more detail by reviewing existent work in terms of online social networks and eParticipation or citizen participation and by presenting the results of a survey targeted at mapping the use of social media by European Institutions.

The remaining of this paper is organised as follows: The second section presents the survey methodology while the third covers key theoretical aspects of social networks. The fourth section shortly discusses previous work in terms of participatory dynamics of social networks and the fifth
presents key findings of the survey. The last section summarises the findings and poses additional challenges for future research.

2. Methodology

In order to identify relevant eParticipation settings, the authors have accessed the central page of the ‘take part’ page of the European Union portal (http://europa.eu/take-part/index_en.htm), which lists the means through which citizens can participate in an online debate or a consultation. The link included a list of the EU presence on social networking sites, which the authors used as a primary source of information. As the list was not exhaustive, the authors identified additional profiles through the list of followers (Twitter), list of fans/friends (Facebook) and related videos (YouTube). The specific stage of research does not envisage content analysis of social media profiles; nevertheless, an analysis of some characteristics is performed as follows:

- Twitter: number of followers, number of tweets/posts, frequency of tweets, number of retweets and replies.
- Facebook: number of fans, frequency of new/original posts, number of comments/replies to posts, number of posts from other users (where applicable), short screening of deliberation patterns.
- YouTube: number of views, number of relevant comments/replies.

Parameters such as the deliberation patterns, number of replies to posts, number of retweets and replies/comments were not directly used in the presentation of the results in the relevant figures and tables but still underline the discussion of the results.

The survey took place from June until December 2011; therefore, it is estimated that there will be a range of differences in the metrics employed and the number of profiles at present due to the pervasive nature and the dynamics of social media.

It is also noted that the specific survey solely focuses on the use of social media. Therefore, it does not endeavour a full coverage of the existing range of eParticipation offerings on behalf of the European Institutions where citizen participation is envisaged on different levels: participation in public consultations, petitioning, participation in surveys and online debates.

Whilst the article attempts to provide an overview of relevant theory and the empirical evidence generated by the survey, the authors would like to note that the survey is only a preliminary investigation of the modes of social network use by institutions. Therefore, the survey is not directly linked to the parameters arising from the theory, as this would require first developing a robust theoretical framework linking eParticipation use with social network theory. This however can spur further research in such a vibrant domain.

3. Understanding Social Networks

Social networking sites can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles, articulate lists of other users with whom they share connections and view/transverse a list of connections” (boyd, 2007: 211; boyd, 2010: 42). With the advent of the participative web, where user empowerment leads to developing, collaborating and customising applications (OECD, 2007), new services have surfaced that link user participation, data and mass intelligence. This is acknowledged as bearing significant social and economic implications, such as lower barriers to entry, distribution costs of information, etc.
Furthermore, technological enablers, such as broadband penetration, rise of Internet services, eSkills etc., and social parameters such as desire for connectivity and sharing, have spurred the proliferation of social networking sites (OECD, 2007). Due to the social networks’ possibilities for enhancing relational social ties, these sites have captured the attention of eParticipation stakeholders. Social networks can serve as platforms for increasing participation, engaging the public, exchanging views, stimulating political debates and sharing information on key political developments (OECD, 2007; boyd, 2008). These functions are mainly performed by reaching more people and keeping them updated through regular posts to build more sustainable social relationships, by creating a cross-dissemination and awareness space. Correspondingly, social networking sites enable users to be informed on various initiatives through one central access point, notwithstanding previous eParticipation initiatives that were fragmented, unconnected and existent in isolated URLs.

Social network theories are deeply ingrained in social theory and theories of social capital. Social capital theories (Putman, 2000; Kenny, 1992) focus on social capital as the network of relationships aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships; therefore, relationships, trust and norms are the elements pertaining to social capital. Social capital that facilitates citizen engagement is generated in personal social networks and the theory purports that the amount of politically relevant social capital determines the citizen’s decision to be politically active, along with amount of expertise and frequency of political interactions (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Coleman, 1988). Hence, social capital encourages citizen engagement notwithstanding some additional factors of individual traits and organisational involvement. Although social network theories do not focus on the use of technology, they do recognise technological parameters in that they might increase mass communication and provide the kernel for debate and discussions. Social capital is also deemed an important outcome of collective action as well as a prerequisite to its success in leading to conflict resolution, effective decision making, efficient coordination and increased capacity to respond to future challenges.

From a social theory point of view, it has been correspondingly found that the interaction in social networks increases the propensity to participate in politics through increased opportunities for information gathering and through exposure to information pertaining to politics and through exposure to information that might bear some relation to deciding whether or not to participate (McClurg, 2003; Kenny, 1992). In similar terms, some authors find that the effect of social interaction on participation depends on the amount and quality of social relationships and political debates occurring in social networks (McClurg, 2003; Mench, 2006). It is also postulated by the social network model that people “become politically active if they accrue social resources” (McClurg, 2003: 451). Nevertheless, social network effects have not been adequately investigated due to the absence of a theoretical framework connecting social networks and political involvement and a model with ample exploratory power to recognise social diversity, inequality and other parameters (McClurg, 2003; boyd, 2010).

Notwithstanding the robustness of these theories, another strand of research occupies itself with both technological and political processes. It has been claimed that both systems (technological and political) can maximise their impact on public engagement, so the Internet is perceived as a medium that can assist engagement processes (Shah et al., 2005; Mandarano et al., 2010). In other words, it is found that the Internet can mobilise political participation, while survey-based studies assert that the Internet normalises participation (Hirzalla et al., 2010). However, this paper does not plan to further touch upon these theories, as they trigger issues and elements related to the network society (Castells, 2005) and other theoretical considerations that cannot be practically separated from social network analysis.
Another aspect of social networks that needs to draw further attention is the relationship between social networks and the public sphere, as social networks cannot be perceived as a panacea for forging and sustaining social relationships, harnessing social capital and formulating a public discourse arena known as the public sphere. The public sphere is perceived by the leading theorist Jürgen Habermas (1992) as the sphere that mediates between the domains of the family, the workplace and the state which consists of social spaces, where individuals discuss common public affairs. It is equally perceived as consisting of a “space that, not only enables autonomous opinion formation but also empowers the citizens to influence the decision makers” (Eriksen & Fossum, 2004: 351) and a “common space for free communication secured by rights of freedom of expression, where problems are discovered and formed into opinions and wills that formal decision-making agencies act upon” (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002: 403). It was previously acknowledged (Smith, 2009) that the EU wished to base its communication strategy on the existence of a genuine European Public Sphere. For instance, the European Communication policy (European Commission, 2006) attempts to stimulate the formation of such a public sphere through ICT. However, despite increasing resources towards a common communicative space, it is more possible that segmented publics began to emerge around policy networks in certain policy areas rather than a single European public sphere (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002). Social media can thus trigger new dynamics by virtue of the formulation of the public sphere, which is a prerequisite to political action.

However, there are inherent counter arguments to the democratising effects of online social media. Social networks are often referred to as a new generation Internet democracy, which has distinctive effects in displacing the public sphere with a networked citizen-centred model of social relationship (boyd, 2010). According to the literature, online social media have a great potential to shape social relations but they can also trigger scepticism over “networked individualism” (Castells, 2005), fragmented social spaces, negative campaigning, populist extremism, chaotic participation, small level of inclusiveness, partisan politics, which are all exacerbating factors to rational deliberation and critical discussion (boyd, 2010; Iosifidis, 2011). Some arguments even point to the risk of domination which claims that only participants that are loud and opinionated can survive in social networks (Keen, 2007). In short, there are inherent structural differences between social spaces on the Internet and the traditional “offline” ones in that asymmetries of power and other discursive deliberative criteria are not taken into heed, and thus structured conversation cannot arise between similar deliberative groups. This risk needs to be carefully analysed in future research to enhance our understanding of the contemporary online political environment.

With an average of more than 200 000 people registering on Facebook daily, organisations and governments have expanded to encompass social networks in their operations. Public relations-oriented blogs and trade organisations have promoted these sites as relationship building tools. Non-profit organisations also use social media to interact with external stakeholders, to educate and to stimulate awareness. According to Waters (2011), the crucial element of social networking site profiles lies in the information that is being distributed. The most common forms of message dissemination include posting links to external news items about the organisation or its causes; posting photographs, video, or audio files from the organisation and its supporters; and using the message board or discussion wall to post-announcements and answer questions.

4. Relevant Work

An emerging question is the degree of existing evidence that may contribute to our understanding of online social networks in terms of political involvement.
Baumgartner (2010) examined the political uses of social networking sites by young adults in the frame of the US 2008 presidential primary season. The findings do not advocate democratic engagement, participation, greater political knowledge or stimulated political interest. In particular, he found that the news collected had a minor effect to inform or add to political discourse in young adults. Nevertheless, social networks are indeed recognised by young adults as one of several possible sources of political news, and that many receive at least some of their news from these sites. Still, it is debatable whether news can contribute to democratic discourse for an individual with no propensity or inclination to follow political-related news.

Roberts (2004) finds that representative democracy is being encouraged with new ICT and user-generated content to the extent that online trends may be reproducing or mirroring more general offline trends in the focus of political parties to their constituents. As concerns the results on the communicative patterns dominating the social networks, Waters (2011) performed a content analysis on non-profit organisations’ profiles on Facebook and found the most often used strategy was disclosure of information and less dissemination and involvement. Sæbø (2011) investigates tweets of Norwegian parliamentary representatives and finds five communication purposes: to provide links to information sources for other Twitter users; to inform about the representative’s ongoing activities; to express views on topical issues; to introduce non-political (private) content; and to participate in online discussions with other parliamentary representatives. Other less frequent communication patterns include tweets attracting attention to the representative’s own blogs, requests for input from readers and ultimately discussions with citizens. In addition, it was shown that the tweets did not contribute to deliberation as they are dominated by politicians. Thus, it was concluded that Twitter’s use was much closer linked to the liberal democracy model (i.e. linked to provision of information). Similarly, Panagiotopoulos (2012) examines about 296,000 tweets from 1,897 local government authorities and reports positive patterns of Twitter uses since accounts appear to generate interest and activity on a number of topics and to engage in debates, to respond to public queries etc.

Golbeck et al. (2010) established the use of Twitter by members of the US Congress as mainly to promote links to their blogs or articles about themselves, instead of attempting to provide the public with new insights about legislative processes. Waters et al. (2011) analysed 1,800 tweets posted by 60 USA governmental accounts and concluded that increased interactivity with the public cannot be a realistic goal, as actors seek to preserve the traditional locus of control in public communications.

On the other hand, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and other online platforms can provide extremely high levels of networking and exposure to political information. According to a recent research (Pasek et al., 2009; boyd, 2008; Breindl, 2008), social capital and the online use of social networks can facilitate civic engagement. Despite the increased popularity of these networks there is a need for empirical research to assess the extent such practices are improving government transparency, accountability, responsiveness and interaction with their citizens. At this time, impact assessment of digital public participation on social capital is scarce and the immediate question of how social networks are correlated with political engagement received little attention.

5. Overview of Initiatives

In the survey conducted, 124 profiles from five social networks have been identified. About half of the profiles have been found on Twitter and one third on Facebook. The rest of networks referred to is Hyves, YouTube, Flickr and Vimeo. Concerning the classification of types of profiles created, formal Institutions dominate, as they create profiles relevant to their formal names, followed by policies
(Directorate-Generals or thematic policies) and persons that act as figures for the European Union (e.g. President of the Commission, Commissioners, President of the Parliament etc). Six profiles which did not correspond to any of the categories in Table 1 were placed under ‘various’. We note once again that in this stage of the research, no content analysis takes place. However, some basic metrics have helped to outline the main modes of use of social networks. Table 1 below presents an overview of the use of social networks by social media and by profile type.

Table 1: Use of social networks by European Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL MEDIA</th>
<th>TOTAL COUNT (N)</th>
<th>PERSONS</th>
<th>POLICIES</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONS</th>
<th>VARIOUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You Tube</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyves</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flickr &amp; Vimeo photostreams</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>124</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Figure 1 below presents the allocation of accounts per social media.

Figure 1: Allocation of accounts per social media

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1 It should be clarified that the classification (Persons/Policies/Institutions/Various) reflects the authors’ perception. In the ‘Take part’ link, the generic classification is different (e.g. persons are included in the Institutions).
Twitter appears to be the most widely used social platform as the majority of the profiles can be found on Twitter. Specifically, the following types of profiles have been identified in detail:

- Profiles by Institutions (e.g. European Parliament, European Aviation Safety Agency, European Economic and Social Committee, European Central Bank) that are actually the majority;
- Profiles by specific Common Market Policies\(^2\) (EU internal market, Innovation Union, EU regional policy, Enterprise and Industry, EU consumer affairs etc.);
- Profiles by specific persons (Commissioner for Climate Action, Commissioner for Digital Agenda, President of the Parliament, etc.).

As noted above, some Twitter profiles were classified under ‘various’ as they could not be categorised due to their specific nature (e.g. [Europarltv.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu)) links and specific events).

The most popular profiles are shown in Table 2. With no intention to normalise conclusions or generalise the norms of profile use, there are some common genres of communication that tend to characterise most of the accounts:

- Profiles are characterised by almost daily tweets and a large number of followers;
- Tweets by Institutions regard up-to-date EU issues, such as events, decisions, etc.;
- Tweets and retweets provide links to other social media, chats and live sessions;
- Retweets are mainly made from other related profiles, EU sources or officials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Most popular social media pages/accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President of the European Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Space Agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) It has to be noted in some cases the distinction between Institutions and Policies can be blurred, as Policies might emerge from their name (e.g. Social Europe, Environment) or by their relevant DG. In the latter case, the count is included as institutions.

\(^3\) Based solely on the number of views.

\(^4\) Based on profiles with more than 1 000 tweets and 1 000 followers in total.

\(^5\) On a per month basis.

\(^6\) On a per month basis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
<th>Retweets</th>
<th>Type Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament YouTube channel</td>
<td>87,651</td>
<td>9,167</td>
<td>Youth on the Move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Environmental Agency Channel</td>
<td>99,845</td>
<td>8,374</td>
<td>Humanitarian Aid-ECHO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation Union</td>
<td>5,587</td>
<td>3,214</td>
<td>External Action Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Environmental Agency Channel</td>
<td>3,666</td>
<td>2,824</td>
<td>Innovation Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of the European Union</td>
<td>3,155</td>
<td>1,732</td>
<td>European Patent Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights</td>
<td>2,766</td>
<td>1,603</td>
<td>Commissioner for Inter. Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>1,392</td>
<td>Enterprise and Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>Eurobarometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Agenda</td>
<td>692</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td>European Commission Audiovisual service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP’s on Facebook</td>
<td>(cannot be estimated)</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>European Training Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Commission Liaison Office to Kosovo</td>
<td>3,544</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>CORDIS Funding News</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twitter is mostly used to provide updates on major European issues and the activities of the Institutions. Tweets tend to reach a substantial number of the public and to act as a dissemination base for the information provided through retweets by followers. A secondary communication norm is to diffuse personal feelings and ideas, which is especially true for personal profiles (figureheads of the EU). In the specific cases, the number of retweets by followers increases in cases where figures tend to express personal feelings or ideas on mainly two themes: the economic downturn and the future of Europe. However, the pronounced success of this medium can be exacerbated when considering that about one-fifth of the accounts are characterised by a low number of tweets (2-3 per month) and a low number of followers. This however might be contingent upon the ‘communication profile’ and the mandate of specific institutions (such as the European Central Bank), which focus on ‘technical’ tweets, as for instance announcing results, call for events or new legislation.
Facebook is the second most popular social media with about 36 accounts identified; half of the accounts represent policies, while less than half represent Institutions. Facebook’s communication norms are summarised as follows:

- Profiles mostly upload information on decisions made, activities and initiatives, updates on legislation etc. encouraging some kind of deliberation and discussion on the posts;
- Dissemination of invitations, questions and new initiatives is performed through posts and cross-links;
- Profiles quite often create short polls and receive comments in the forms of petitioning;
- Facebook serves as a space for hosting re-tweets and re-posts from other social media, especially for existing personal profiles;
- Profiles cross-post information by users in some policy cases.

Some discussions in profiles/walls of major Institutions such as the Commission and the Parliament are carefully moderated, with frequent requests made to users to respect certain rules, as domination and intolerance were noted.

As Facebook is not utilised to its full potential, it appears that in some cases political matters become an arena for personal ideologies rather than deliberation. From a general screening of some discussions taking place on profiles, users are in some cases irrelevant to the subject of discussions or engage in irreverent and disrespectful comments. Policy-related profiles attract a large number of fans and an active administration on behalf of profile owners; however deliberation is discouraged despite the fact that in some cases, deliberation is purposely triggered on behalf of profile owners. Some pages dedicated to liaisoning (e.g. European Commission Liaison Office and Delegations) are only restricted to providing basic information. In addition, a large fraction of the accounts are cross-posting information from other social media, especially Twitter. This is especially true for personal profiles. Hence, Facebook tends to focus on information sharing and act as a ‘cross-dissemination’ space in conjunction with Twitter.

YouTube dedicated channels are widely used by the European Institutions for uploading speeches and promotional videos. This medium is characterised by a very low level of deliberativeness, as in most of the cases, comments are deactivated and the channels focus only on one-way communication with the public (transmission of videos, speeches, plenary sessions, etc.). In other cases, question and answer sessions or short polls might be incorporated. A notable exception might be the European Space Agency YouTube Channel where due to its mandate and rich audiovisual material, the interaction between the Agency and the public is facilitated. The YouTube service is less attractive to personal accounts, but key EU figures (President of the Council of the EU, President of the European Commission) maintain personal channels. Photo-sharing facilities are frequently used by personal profiles to disseminate specific information or events but no eParticipation elements can be clearly identified.

YouTube Channels and multimedia platforms were extremely popular within the European Institutions from the advent of their eParticipation settings, such as EUTube, EuroParlTv.eu and the European Parliament’s audiovisual services (Smith, 2009). These endeavours gained in popularity due to the depth of information they could provide on European policies (European Commission, COM(2006) 35, European Commission, COM(2007) 568, European Commission, SEC(2007) 1742, European Commission ...

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7 During the research period, it was noted that a sharp proliferation of Facebook profiles took place. The number thus might have changed.
SEC(2008) 506/2), as well as the impact and simple learning curve of such media. According to these documents, “better use of the audiovisual media should aim at supplying information in a form that is attractive to users, promotes, active European citizenship and contributes to the development of a European public sphere” (European Commission SEC(2008) 506/2: 3).

Figure 2 provides a schematic visualisation of how social networks are used by the European Institutions. This only represents a ‘bottom-up’ personal estimation of the pronounced mode of use of social media and does not intent to incorporate a framework of analysis. As shown in the figure, Twitter is used for sharing links and cross dissemination, while Facebook is firstly used for providing news, links, updates, cross-dissemination and to a lesser extent, deliberation. The flow of information among the networks is continuous and in some cases automatic (use of other platforms to automatically update a specific one) specifying enhanced connectivity between the networks.

![Figure 2: Overview of social media use](image)

Although the deliberation and problem-solving rationale were not the priorities, the formulation of a public sphere and the dynamics of communication to the crystallisation of citizenship should not be undermined in the case of social media. It is extremely difficult to isolate the rhetorical endorsement of social media use since there are no documents to date that capture communication policy in terms of social media. A working hypothesis might surface for some of the profiles (Facebook) written intentions which are summarised as “pages aimed to provide a broad platform for diverse opinions and discussions, host debates and voice opinions under the condition that contributions are related to the subject”. In the case of social media, citizenship and the formulation of public sphere might be the ‘hidden’ objective. Instead, multimedia services are viewed as innovative offers that can facilitate information provision in political and other issues. For instance, dedicated parliamentary channels can provide political knowledge or on demand news and information programmes ensure a closer relationship with the audience, especially for young people. However, it has been found that the democratising potential of media efforts can be limited as it does not mirror an opportunity for citizens to voice demands (Vaccari, 2011).
6. Conclusions

Social networks are being investigated through mainly three different lenses: social network theories, social capital theories and technological theories/surveys which postulate that the social networks can indeed create social capital, although political engagement is contingent on other factors as well. Social networks increase the tendency to participate through exposure to information. Nevertheless, there are inherent structural differences between social spaces on the Internet and the traditional ‘offline’ social spaces. Other characteristics need to be taken into consideration such as power domination, empathy, inclusiveness and other discursive deliberative criteria. Thus, theoretical and empirical research could further focus on a framework that allows the assessment of social networks and civic engagement and address how usage can contribute to democratic discourse and participation.

A relevant survey on the use of online social networks by European Institutions reveals that Twitter is the preferred method of communication with the European public, followed by Facebook. Communication media, such as YouTube and Vimeo also attract the European Institutions. The Institutions do not have a unified presence in all networks but different DG’s, Institutions or persons/Commissioners use their preferred means for communicating with the public. Distinct policies (environment, regional policy, innovation) have equally attracted a large number of profiles. Online social media are mainly used as a ‘cross-dissemination and awareness space’. Short notifications via tweets, link sharing, news and updates are the most common modes of communication with social networks, while deliberation is exclusively performed via Facebook and only in limited cases.

Some questions arise from this preliminary screening of initiatives, including: are the issues disseminated of particular salience to users? Do these spaces exert a strong influence on political participation or awareness? Do users feel more inclined to participate in discussions that take place in social networks?

Lastly, is the information sharing rationale of social networks sacrificing deliberation and true eParticipation or is it a preliminary stage of awareness raising in the complex institutional and cultural settings of European politics? As it has been also proposed beforehand, future research could focus on delivering a robust theoretical framework linking eParticipation use of online social networks with social network and social capital theory, so as to allow the testing of empirical evidence under a theoretical endorsement.

7. References


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