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What role does Web 2.0 play in the EP communications strategy and what potential does it have to address the perceived EU-citizen gap?

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Contents

Abstract

The European Parliament faces a recognised communications gap, which Web 2.0 technologies may have the potential to address. This dissertation summarises the current research on the use of Web 2.0 technologies for promoting citizen engagement and democratic participation, and reviews the EP's use of these technologies as part of their online presence, using a modified version of Dahl's ideal democracy as an analytic framework. In conclusion it presents a critical evaluation of the impact of Web 2.0 on EP-citizen relations, and makes recommendations for further research.

1. Introduction

Democratic deficits, across multiple administrative levels and political contexts, have been the subject of much discussion in recent literature. One of the main reasons for the loss of trust in democratic processes, even in states with considerable political will to support and improve citizen engagement, is that citizens simply do not feel sufficiently involved in the political and decision-making processes. Today's public issues are increasingly complex and globalised, and the broad spectrum of unsubstantiated information and opinions available on such issues can make them even more difficult to understand. Combined with a lack of communication with political representatives, this gives many citizens the impression that all political decisions are made behind closed doors, preventing them from influencing important decisions which affect their lives. Insufficient accountability mechanisms and regular corruption scandals add to this perception, which is reflected in the results of the Eurobarometer public opinion survey (2011, p.27 and p.41) which show that 60% of EU citizens distrust their national parliament, and 38% distrust the European Parliament (EP).

Although the figure for the European Parliament is lower, the communications problems it faces are considerably more challenging, since it spans twenty-seven individual countries using twenty-three languages. In the current absence of a European public sphere, there is great potential for the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), commonly referred to as Web 2.0, to bridge the EU-citizen gap, and many scholars argue that Web 2.0 media could

play an important role in engaging citizens and encouraging greater levels of political participation through effective e-governance, especially among the younger and more disengaged audience. In this paper I will examine what role Web 2.0 plays in the the EP's online communications strategy, and ask whether it is being used to the fullest of its potential to reach out and connect with citizens.

In my literature review I will examine the research to date on the use of ICTs in general, and Web 2.0 technologies in particular, for e-governance and e-participation. I will briefly describe how exactly the term Web 2.0 has been defined, and then go on to present the main opinions (both positive and negative) on its potential uses in e-governance and to promote citizen engagement. Lastly, I will examine some of the recognised challenges it presents to governments and the measures deemed necessary to combat these. After this I will present my hypotheses and critical framework, followed by a content analysis of the EP's Facebook presence. I will assess the results of the analysis in the context of my critical framework and evaluate in what ways the EP's use of Facebook contributes to promoting EU-wide democratic inclusion. In conclusion I will present my observations and recommendations for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Technology and democratic processes

Ever since use of the internet became widespread among individuals, corporations and governments, opinion has been split as to its effect on democratic politics, and whether the internet has the potential to transform citizen-government interactions, creating a new and improved 21st century version of ancient Greek democracy or whether the new technologies and forms of communication arising from it will have a negative impact on democratic processes (Tait, 2012). As early as 2002, Weare (2002, p.663) observed contrasting views on the internet's potential to either enhance or impede political activity. He notes that researchers have linked the rise of the internet to many positive outcomes: greater citizen empowerment, new forms of community, re-invigorated democratic discourse, improved participatory democracy and new forms of interactive democracy which overcome voter apathy.

At the same time, however, new ICTs have been associated with the reinforcement of existing power divisions, increased social fragmentation, greater levels of control and surveillance and the commercialization of political concerns. According to Wright (2006, pp.236-237) three main schools of thought emerged about the potential effect of the internet on democratic politics:

- The internet will revolutionise democratic systems, completely transforming their functioning by allowing mass participation in democratic processes.

- The internet will re-invigorate representative democracy by providing technical solutions to challenges currently faced by citizens and governments, either by strengthening traditional methods or supporting them with new ones.

- Politics will remain unaffected and will normalise and assimilate the internet into its established structures, as politicians incorporate new technologies into the existing system, limiting their revolutionary potential.

In various attempts and experiments regarding the use of the internet as a political tool, ICTs were gradually introduced into the public sector during the 1990's, creating what is now called e-government, a term which is used to describe government use of ICTs to provide public services via the internet, allowing citizens to complete activities ranging from making tax payments online, to voting for members of parliament (Moon 2002; Carrizales 2008; Schwester 2009). Many scholars now observe that political use of ICTs has evolved from merely broadcasting information and enabling online transactions (e-government) to actively engaging citizens in policy-making and administrative processes (e-governance) (Moon 2002; Finger and Gaëlle 2003; Norris and Moon 2005; Dawes 2008, cited in Xu and Asencio, 2012). The rapid development and widespread adoption of more recent internet communications tools has already facilitated greater progression of the e-participation aspect of e-governance (Sanford and Rose, 2007), and the potential impact of these technologies to open up e-governance and promote social collaboration and citizen engagement and participation has been discussed and debated at length in literature.

2.2. What are Web 2.0 technologies?

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term coined in 2005 by technology expert Tim O'Reilly, and now widely used to describe a diverse spectrum of web-based applications, making the term itself difficult to define precisely. Web 2.0 is not a new version of the internet, but instead refers to new ways of using the internet for data management by exploiting the connections between users, and encouraging participation, collaboration and transparency. Applications and tools which are commonly held to be examples of Web 2.0 include blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, social networking sites, photo and video sharing services, wikis, bookmark sharing services, and peer-to-peer file sharing (O'Reilly, 2005).

Although these applications may seem unrelated, they share underlying technologies and values which distinguish Web 2.0 from Web 1.0 (see Table 1). Firstly, as previously mentioned, Web 2.0 is mostly based on decentralised network structures formed by connections between users, and often with a social aspect. It emphasises the interactive creation and exchange of user-generated content, and encourages mixing and re-mixing data from multiple sources. In this sense, Web 2.0 is described as being user-centric, where users not only consume content, but also produce, edit, discuss and distribute it via peer-to-peer transfer. Users are able to tag and rate Web 2.0 content in a flexible and horizontal format, leading to a form of data classification called folksonomy (as an oppose to traditional taxonomy, where data is classified in a strictly hierarchical format by the publishing entity or authority). Lastly, Web 2.0 platforms typically favour simplicity of design and ease of use, and are in a state of almost constant development, or "perpetual beta", as termed by Osimo (2008, p.18), meaning that both the applications themselves and the way they are used is continually developing and evolving.

Table 1. Comparison between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0

	Web 1.0	**Web 2.0**
Indexing and Retrieval of Information	Hierarchical Classification (Taxonomies)	Non-Hierarchical Classification (Tags or Folksonomies)
Information Flow	Top-down	Horizontal or Bottom-up
The level of Interactivity	One-way or Asymmetric Two-way	Asymmetric or Symmetric Two-way
Role of Users	Audience	Participant
Role of Web Administrator	Publisher	Partner or Protector
The Goal of Communication	Efficient Delivery of Information	Efficient Delivery, Mutual Understanding
Communication Type	Publishing Model	Dialogue Model

(Chun and Kim 2010)

An e-book published by Spannerworks (2006, p.5) categorises the defining characteristics exhibited by social media in the following five points which, since social media are an example of Web 2.0, also serve to aptly describe the main characteristics of all Web 2.0-based media:

- Participation: Social media allow contributions and feedback from all interested parties, disregarding the traditional divide between media producer and consumer.

- Openness: Most social media services encourage feedback and participation, such as comments and sharing of information, and rarely restrict access to content.

- Conversation: Whereas traditional media can be seen as one-way, top-down forms of communication, social media focus more on interactive, two-way channels of communication.

- Community: Social media allow the quick formation of communities based around groups of friends or common interests.

- Connectedness: The majority of social media are heavily dependent on interconnectivity, and make extensive use of hyperlinks, as well as often combining different kinds of media from multiple sources.

These characteristics, along with the adoption of the set of values described previously, has enabled an empowerment of web users and offers them greater levels of participation in increasingly interactive processes. Naturally, this development is particularly relevant to e-participation in e-governance, as Web 2.0 applications have not only a far greater potential for interactively engaging citizens in comparison with web 1.0 technologies, but also allow the creation of new, multi-modal and collaborative networks.

It has been recognised that Web 2.0 technologies have spread rapidly on a global scale and their potential to enhance democracy in political processes has been noted by several international bodies, including the World Economic Forum (2009, p.161), which described Web 2.0 as a technology revolution, which would change governments completely as "The static, publish-and-browse internet is being eclipsed by a new participatory web that provides a powerful platform for the reinvention of governmental structures, public services and democratic processes."

2.3. The democratic potential of Web 2.0

The political or democratic potential of Web 2.0 is a highly discussed topic. One of the most well-known cases showing the potential of these media was the 2008 election of US President Barak Obama, where a presidential candidate extensively used social networks such as Facebook and Myspace to connect directly with voters and mobilise support (Davis 2010, p.22). More recently, attention has been given to the role played by web-based social media in pro-democracy movements in North Africa and the Middle East, arguing that Web 2.0 can aid political activism in undemocratic states (Tait 2012). These two very different examples demonstrate that Web 2.0 applications can be used effectively for a variety of political purposes in multiple social and cultural environments (Abdallah and Khalil, 2009). Considerable literary attention has also been given, however, to the potential uses of Web 2.0 technologies for everyday interactions between citizens

and governments to enhance democracy.

Saebo et al. (2008, p. 415) noted that the literature on ICT potential for e-governance spans many disciplines, primarily political science, political and social theory, public administration and sociology, but with occasional contributions from the fields of information systems, computer science, communications and science and technology studies. This observation still holds true today but most literature reviewed in this dissertation comes from a political science background. Even more evident is the disparity of theoretical frameworks among researchers. Whist many use models of democracy to categorise forms of participation (Tait 2012; Lourenco and Costa 2006; Bingham, Nabatchi and O'Leary 2005), other theories are used often in only one article, as authors pick and choose a particular theory to fit their specific research. For example, Chun and Kim (2010) use dialogic communication theory as developed in public relations to create an analytic model of the various types of Web 2.0 applications for improving website design in order to promote better relationships between governments and their citizens. Hacker (2012), on the other hand, used network theory to explain why the US military recently changed its policies to embrace social networking. Still other authors refer to relevant articles or literature without restricting themselves to any one theory, while many contribute solely empirical evidence or case studies of examples of ICT use in e-governance, without any theoretical framework whatsoever (Spigner et al. 2012; Greenberg et al. 2012; Lara et al. 2012; Staiou et al. 2012; Al Suwaidi et al. 2012; Zavattaro 2012; Casey et al. 2012).

The research methods used by authors also vary, often in accordance with their parent disciplines. Surveys and case studies are common, (Lara et al. 2012; Greenberg et al. 2012; Molinary et al. 2012; Staiou et al. 2012; Al Suwaidi et al. 2012; Xu et at 2012; Hacker 2012; Casey et al. 2012) but other methods, such as content analysis, were also used (Spigner et al. 2012; Zavattaro 2012; Leuven et al. 2012). As this area of research is still relatively young and continually developing, the inconsistency in authors' choices of theories and research methods is understandable (Saebo et al. 2008, p. 416). Empirical examples take precedence over theoretical development in the majority of the literature sample, and as yet no single

dominant theory has emerged on the democratic potential of Web 2.0.

Most likely because of the wide variety of approaches taken and theoretical frameworks applied (or not applied), the many potential opportunities presented to e-governance by Web 2.0 technologies have been grouped and organised in different ways by each author. Despite this, the opportunities identified are essentially the same, and a fairly comprehensive list of the potential uses of individual Web 2.0 technologies are listed in Table 2. Casey and Li (2012) note that while most Web 2.0 technologies at least encourage interaction, the technologies presented in the table vary from extremely interactive tools that could be considered equivalent to face-to-face interactions or group meetings, to less interactive applications that allow a more basic form of communication or information exchange.

Table 2. Web 2.0 technologies and their potential

Technology	Potential
Blogs	Provide information to new audiences; puts a human face on government using an informal tone; opens public conversation; surface and solve issues.
Wikis	Workgroup or public collaboration for project management, knowledge sharing, public input, contributions to third party sites.
Video Sharing and Multimedia	Public outreach, education, training, other communication for "connected" and on-line audiences; how-to videos and audios to improve service and achieve mission; training and education of staff and administrators.
Photo-Sharing	Cost savings potential; attract new audiences; raising issue awareness.
Podcasting	Another tool to disseminate information; build trust with conversational voice; use for project updates; live deliberations; emergencies; how-to messages.
Virtual Worlds	Public outreach; virtual town halls; education; training; ability to bring people together worldwide for meetings, lectures, etc.
Social Networking	Intranet use to cross internal stovepipes; cross government coordination; create public communities; viral impact; knowledge management; recruitment; event announcements.
Syndicated Web	Expand reach; pull content together across government;

Feeds	authoritative source; reduce duplication and keep people up-to-date on project developments.
Mashups	Expand government reach; provide service; integrate external data; make content available to others that use mashups; foster deliberation and issue identification.
Widgets, Gadgets, Pipes	Increase awareness of what is happening in government or agencies; bring content and key information to the user's home page.
Social Bookmark & News	Increase the popularity and use of particular governmental web sites; information; and services.
Micro-blogging, Presence Networks	Seek input; broadcast messages; emergencies; news; announcements; real time reporting.

(Casey and Li 2012)

The majority of scholars, however, agree that Web 2.0 technologies promote essential principles of good governance such as openness, inclusiveness and citizen participation, and have the potential to improve citizen engagement, increase transparency and allow governments to be more responsive to the needs of the public (Al Suwaidi et al. 2012; Hui et al. 2010; Staiou et al. 2012; Lara et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2010; Osimo 2008; O'Reilly 2005; Ayanso et al. 2012; Millard 2010; Xu et at 2012; Tait 2012; Bertot et al. 2010). Beyond that, each focuses on different aspects of the development of Web 2.0 as a tool for e-governance. For example, after undertaking a web survey and a review of existing initiatives in the public and private sector, Osimo (2008, pp.23-39) identifies seven domains in which Web 2.0 technologies could be applied to e-governance. His analysis shows that ICTs focus mainly on citizen-government relations but that some Web 2.0 applications are also relevant for public administration and office activities.

- The first domain is regulation, which could establish a foundation for more direct and open government engagement with citizens and experts during the decision-making process, and provide opportunities for individual citizens to more effectively demand and push forward specific regulations.

- The second domain is cross-agency cooperation, which has the potential to reduce fragmentation between levels, agencies and departments within and between organisations and so increase their efficiency and effectiveness.

- The third domain is knowledge management, where Web 2.0 technologies can be effective both internally, for sharing knowledge informally, and externally, to find, select and use niche competences. In addition, Osimo identified this domain as being a key factor in improving government efficiency and effectiveness in general.

- The fourth domain is political participation and transparency, with the potential to encourage and support citizens to engage in the public sphere.

- The fifth domain is service provision, as Web 2.0 technologies have the potential to help provide high-quality and easy-to-use services to citizens.

- The sixth domain is law enforcement. Osimo views Web 2.0 as offering citizens a more active role in an area of competence traditionally reserved for the government. He gives examples of sites which allow users to post photos of vehicles illegally parked, or where users discuss local problems such as vandalism or graffiti, as well as police use of media such as YouTube to propagate CCTV footage publicly in order to help them identify criminals caught on camera.

- Finally, the seventh domain is internal government operations, including interoperability, public communication, public sector information, human resource management and others.

Many scholars predicted when the internet first started to become widespread that it would transform traditional political bureaucracy by increasing governance's focus on its external relationship with citizens (Bennett 2003; Ho 2002; Lilleker and Jackson 2008, cited in Chun and Kim, 2010). They believed that the internet would mature over time into a user-friendly platform through which citizens could participate in public discourses and political discussion, a change that appears to have come about with the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies. Although diverse, the majority of the current literature on Web 2.0 for e-government and e-governance agrees that the new technologies and applications have a transformative impact primarily on government-citizen relations. Bertot and Jaeger (2010, p.54), for instance, identify five specific opportunities for governments to use social media

technology for government-citizen interactions:

- Democratic participation and engagement through which social media technologies can involve the public in government decision processes.

- Co-production, through which governments and the public jointly develop, design, and deliver government services.

- Crowd-sourced solutions, through which governments seek innovation through public knowledge.

- Transparency and accountability through which government is open and transparent regarding its operations to build trust and foster accountability.

- Real-time location-specific information using apps and mobile resources.

Now, with the emergence of a new generation of e-government which employs Web 2.0 technologies and social media to engage citizens, many researchers expect this development to alter the way in which governments interact with citizens and operate public services (Chun et al. 2010; Abdallah and Khalil 2009). Fraser and Dutta (2008, cited in Suwaidi and Elbadawi 2012) also believe that the growing popularity of social networking will force a shift away from the traditionally top-down, hierarchical and rigid structures of governance institutions. They argue that the inherently horizontal, flexible and informal nature of these networks has the effect of disaggregating societal identities and diffusing power among citizens. Some researchers, such as Hui and Hayllar (2010), Millard (2010), Bertot et al. (2010), claim that, via e-participation, Web 2.0 even has the potential to enable a more demand-led approach to governance by empowering citizens and allowing government bodies to respond more quickly and effectively to public needs.

Several authors also point to Web 2.0 applications and tools to enhance political accountability and transparency (Bertot et al. 2010; Shim and Eom 2009), and although still in its infancy, their research shows that some governances at county level have already started to utilize ICTs to improve transparency. Spigner et al. (2012, p.21) reason that through the use of new information and communication technologies, citizens can gain increased access to government information, hence

keeping government more accountable. They go on to suggest that opening government information up to citizens in this way could be seen as a key step towards expanding democracy, as in order to effectively participate in democratic processes citizens need knowledge, which they derive in turn from what information they have access to. Having greater access to higher quality information not only enables citizens to more effectively participate in their government's decision making but provides a means of opening up political processes to public scrutiny. Jensen (2003, pp.39-40) adds that e-participation may eventually become even more effective than offline forms of participation since citizens have access to more information online from which to come to an enlightened understanding as a basis for their political decisions.

Wyld (2007 cited in Ayanso and Moyers 2012) observes that Web 2.0 tools, especially wikis, blogs, microblogs and online forums not only increase the depth and breadth of information that can be supplied to citizens, but can improve both internal and external government communications by enabling dynamic content and near real-time interaction in service provision at all levels. This enhanced interactivity is seen to be central to Web 2.0's function in facilitating participatory democracy (Chadwick et al. 2003; Lilleker and Jackson 2008), and is especially useful as a motivational factor to increase user involvement and engagement in governance websites. Interactive features encourage users to take part in web-mediated political communication by creating their own messages and content and sharing them with both the government and other citizens (Chun and Kim 2010).

One of the advantages of Web 2.0 over traditional media is that it gives citizens a space to take part in convenient and informal discussions on politics and policy. Web 2.0 technologies could potentially further support e-governance by providing entirely new ways for citizens and governments to interact with each other. Many researchers highlight the potential Web 2.0 technologies provide for government-citizen collaboration and crowd-sourcing (Osimo 2008; Chun and Kim 2010, Bertot and Jaeger 2010). Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, alongside blogging platforms and mobile internet technology, now allow governments to access society's collective knowledge and opinions quickly and

directly. In this way, it is argued, citizens' roles shift from that of passive consumers of government services to advisers, innovators and contributors of ideas. Although public feedback and collaboration may not guarantee better service delivery, such participatory methods can aid policy makers in setting priorities that are in better accord with citizens' individual and group needs (UN 2010, pp.44-45).

Noveck (2009, cited in Suwaidi and Elbadawi 2012) in particular discusses how social media could improve democratic practices and the quality of decisions made by government agencies by allowing direct citizen participation in drafting government policies. Building on the United States Patent and Trademark Office Peer-to-Patent project, Noveck suggests using Web 2.0 applications such as wiki tools for co-drafting policies in a collaborative and group-based model of citizen participation. Hujiboom et al. (2009, pp.55-56) agree, positing that crowd sourcing mechanisms could make the compiling, structuring and distribution of public sector information more effective, and simultaneously improve government transparency and empower citizens to make public officials accountable. Other potential benefits of crowd-sourced policy-making initiatives identified by researchers include encouraging more citizens to support policies (since they helped to formulate them), and thus to increase the likelihood of successful policy outcomes and overall levels of public satisfaction (United Nations 2010).

2.4. Web 2.0 as a tool for engagement

A considerable amount of literature devotes itself to the question of whether the internet in general, and social media in particular, can help to politically engage previously disengaged members of society, in particular youth (Davies and Cranston 2008; DCLG 2008; Ofcom 2009; Smith et al. 2009). Levels of citizen participation have traditionally been determined by demographic and socio-economic factors. Citizens who participate most actively are typically middle-aged and have a high socio-economic status and educational level. At the other end of the spectrum, those with the lowest levels of participation are young people of low socio-economic status and educational level (Lara and Naval 2012).

Alongside these variables, however, internet access appears to be gaining

prominence as a factor determining citizen's political participation. A study by Ofcom (2009, p.4) showed that in a sample of regular internet users, the rate of both online and offline participation was higher than the national average. Likewise, in the least privileged sample (where all levels of participation are generally lower), the rate of participation is higher among those who have internet access at home than among those who do not. Survey responses from the same sample suggest that internet access aids participation by reducing the time required to take part in civic and political activities, as the time needed was given as the main reason preventing the respondents from greater participation, although lack of interest also ranked highly.

Many researchers have agreed that ICTs could be a way to both broaden and deepen participation among disengaged groups by creating "new channels of democratic inclusion", both increasing the frequency of communications between citizens, governments and elected representatives, but also the quality of that dialogue (Tait 2012, Lara and Naval 2012, Suwaidi and Elbadawi 2012). There is some opposition to this view, such as Boulianne (2009), who argues that internet use actually has a negative effect on civic participation, due to the amount of time spent online reducing the time remaining available to be employed offline, and Rheingold (2008) who considers online media as a useful tool to help citizens commit to political engagement, but not in itself a solution to disengagement.

Many studies demonstrate that young people and young adults make up the majority of the users of social networks. Eurobarometr findings (2011, p.12) show that 56% of EU citizens aged 15 to 24 use social networks every day or almost every day, making such networks an ideal means to communicate with this disengaged audience. Researchers agree that participating in social media networks has a socializing effect and promotes a sense of belonging to a community but opinion is still are divided as to whether there is any knock-on effect on fostering civil society, although the Pew Internet study (2009), which analyses the civic engagement of American adults, did find small amounts of evidence suggesting that social networks encourage a more participative attitude and greater civic involvement.

2.5. Challenges for governments

Despite the widely recognised potential of Web 2.0 for e-governance, its uptake has been slower than might have been expected. An extensive survey of New Jersey municipalities by Carrizales (2008, pp.19-24) suggests that managerial attitude towards ICTs is the chief factor either promoting or preventing the adoption of e-governance. Another study of American governments by Aikins and Krane (2010, p.99) further reveals that a large portion of city officials prefer traditional media (television, radio, newspaper and mail) over digital media for citizen participation. Other factors also come into play however, as noted by D'Agostino et al. (2011, p.20), such as scarcity of government resources, the limitations of existing e-participation mechanisms and the need to achieve a balance between efficiency and quality of participation. Because of these factors, the uptake of e-governance has fallen considerably behind that of e-government, which provides straightforward services, without the added complications of citizen participation (Xu and Asencio 2012).

Bertot and Jaeger (2010) suspect that the rapid development of Web 2.0 technology has outrun governments' ability to adapt to it, resulting in the adoption of some tools without full consideration of their purpose or effectiveness, and point out that social media applications for e-participation must be integrated into the decision-making process in a formal and transparent way so that people can tell that their opinions are being taken into consideration. Linder and Taylor-Smith (2010) agree, adding that such initiatives are often planned without sufficient clarity about their political goals, and as a result have little impact on policy-making. Molinari et al. (2010) also note that many e-participation initiatives are not fully embedded and integrated politically, but are still at the stage of being experiments or pilot schemes. Many authors therefore agree that an important goal for e-governance research is to ascertain the conditions under which Web 2.0 technologies can formally become an integrated part of governance systems (Grönlund 2010, Lampe et al. 2011).

As well as doubting as to the extent of the uptake of Web 2.0 tools for e-governance, some researchers question the actual impact to date of Web 2.0 on governance systems. Osimo (2010, pp.2-4), for example, views the current effects as being much lower than many originally predicted, and other studies have shown that,

despite the number of success stories, many of the reported benefits of Web 2.0 applications in the public sector are more "hoped for" than actually achieved (Kuzma 2010, p.79; Bianchi and Cottica 2010, p.90). Other authors have gone so far as to argue that e-participation in governance only reinforces existing problems with democratic processes, while creating yet more problems to solve (Ostling, 2010, p.49). Kampen and Snijkers (2003, p.495) observe that the relatively low cost of e-participation initiatives gives rise to the risk of "information overload" in which it becomes a major challenge for citizens to distinguish between useful information and background noise. The public may even be at risk from the intentional and malicious spreading of misinformation on sensitive and controversial issues online through Web 2.0 and social media.

As mentioned briefly above, there is also the risk that e-participation initiatives may be driven by technological determinism without careful consideration as to what the added value of such initiatives should be. The extreme ease of use of Web 2.0 tools increases the likelihood that they may be implemented without proper understanding of their functioning, and in the absence of clear outcomes. In this scenario political transparency and accountability is undermined rather than enhanced, and a badly planned or implemented initiative could serve to further increase political disengagement (Coleman 2004, pp.118-119). There are worries as well that e-participation initiatives could be detrimental to political inclusion by excluding those who have less access to computers or the internet (including people from less privileged backgrounds, with disabilities and those in rural or island communities) and those who have lower levels of IT skills (older citizens generally fall into this group), reducing their ability to participate and increasing the digital divide (Norris 2001, Ellcessor 2010, Mossberger 2009, Sylvester et al. 2010).

Using Web 2.0 for e-governance also brings up a wide range of challenges in the areas or privacy, security and control of information. In fact, privacy and security are cited in most of the literature as two of the main concerns when using Web 2.0 technologies in the public sector. A breach of privacy refers to inappropriate use of personal information by those with access to it, whereas a security breach is the theft of such data by parties that do not rightfully have access to it (Suwaidi and Elbadawi

2012, p.466). With the involvement of third party service providers, it is vital to monitor who has access to user data and communications stored online, and for what purposes (Clark 2010, pp.51-52). Another failing of Web 2.0 is connected to its inherent nature as a constantly developing and animated network. As Clark (2010, p.51) notes, the dominant ICT players today, such as Facebook and Google may give way to other, newer service providers over the course of just a few years. Public institutions are notoriously inflexible and slow to react to change, making this a major challenge for them if they are to adopt Web 2.0 technologies effectively.

The problems outlined above illustrate that there are many potential barriers both within and outside of government bodies which hinder the effectiveness of Web 2.0 as a tool for e-governance to promote greater levels of transparency, openness and participation (Bertot et al. 2010). Without making the necessary institutional changes to support the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies, the use of social media and other tools for political use is merely a token gesture rather than a genuine step towards the ideal of democratic citizen participation online. Some conditions researchers identified for Web 2.0 technologies to be implemented successfully include willingness of the government to share data and make government documents publicly available, neutrality in the moderation of Web 2.0 media, provision of equal access to information technology, and education of citizens to allow them to make use of the services and opportunities afforded by the new technologies (Bertot et al. 2009, pp.434-436).

Chun and Kim (2010) identify three major issues for governments to consider before launching a Web 2.0 based communications initiative. The first is choice of channel. Web 2.0 offers a wide range of new channels to facilitate government-citizen communications, but each has different strengths and advantages, and is suitable for different political goals. A blog, for example, promotes a different form of communication than a live chat, and a government's choice of communication channel for individual projects should reflect that.

The second issue stems from the expertise and human resources required to run and maintain Web 2.0 features for e-governance (Chun and Kim 2010). Use of social media itself, as Clark (2010, p.51) notes, does not guarantee policy success, but the content channelled through it can. Creating and supporting that content

requires staff, as does responding to the two-way channels of Web 2.0 communication such as live chats. If governments fail to meet the expectations set up by their media presence (in the case of live chats – a near instant response at all times), the public will quickly lose faith in the the initiative, costing the government valuable trust. Therefore it is important to consider at the design stage what the ongoing cost of any governance feature will be.

The third issue Chun and Kim (2010) identify is the digital divide mentioned previously. Although the number of citizens using the internet has grown rapidly in European countries over the last decade, there are still people who have limited or no access to the internet, who lack the connection speed or bandwidth needed to fully benefit and participate in e-governance, or who simply lack the IT skills necessary to participate. Ways for governments and web designers to tackle this problem include designing user-friendly interfaces for e-governance applications and, more broadly, promoting internet access and IT education.

The final important barrier is cultural in nature. Bradley (2008, cited in Suwaidi and Elbadawi 2012, p.466), argues that citizens might doubt that online political engagement will bring real-life results in terms of public service and government policy. Likewise, governments and their employees may not be convinced of the necessity for the level of openness, transparency and citizen engagement that successful Web 2.0 interaction requires. Several researchers suggest educating employees to raise their awareness and understanding of these issues and of government policies and practices regarding e-governance technologies (Suwaidi and Elbadawi 2012; Clark 2010). O'Reilly (2010) claims there needs to be a cultural shift on the part of both the government and society, and that just as governments need to be prepared to share power with citizens and restructure their policy-making structures around this, so citizens need to take on an active role in providing the government with constructive and useful content via Web 2.0 channels which can then be transformed into policy and service improvements.

With so much dispute over the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on political participation and engagement, there is an evident need for further research on the topic. The technologies in question are continuing to spread and develop and have,

as the literature on the subject shows, vast potential for facilitating greater levels of government-citizen interaction under certain conditions. The European Parliament struggles to find a way to engage its broad base of citizens, and has begun to make use of Web 2.0 technologies in an attempt to bridge this communications gap, but as yet there has been no qualitative review made of the EP's Web 2.0 presence. This paper will address this gap in the literature and in it I will evaluate how the new technologies are used in practice and what impact, if any, their use is having on EP-citizen relations.

3. Hypothesis

In order to evaluate Web 2.0 technology for e-participation tools, Tait (2012) developed a heuristic framework based on a set of criteria for ideal democracy put forward by Dahl (1998). Since this framework has already proved itself a suitable method for assessing new communications technologies for e-participation, I will use an adapted version to critically evaluate the EP's use of Web 2.0 technologies to enhance citizen participation and engagement. Dahl (1998, pp. 37-38) identified five criteria for ideal democracy (conditions which would have to be met in order to satisfy the requirement that all members of a society are equally entitled to participate in decisions about its policies):

- *Effective participation:* all members have an equal and effective opportunity for making their views known to other members.

- *Equality in voting:* all members have an equal and effective opportunity to vote and all votes must be counted as equal.

- *Gaining enlightened understanding:* each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the policies and their likely consequences.

- *Exercising final control over the agenda:* all members must have an opportunity to place matters on agenda.

- *Inclusion of adults:* all members should have the full rights of citizens as implied by the first four criteria.

Meeting these criteria should reduce political disengagement, since all citizens would be democratically included in policy-making and therefore feel sufficiently involved in the political processes of their society, as well and having a greater understanding of public issues. Taking into the account that at the present there are high levels of citizen disengagement and low levels of public trust in the European Parliament, the main hypothesis can be developed as follows: *The EP's use of Web 2.0 technology does not currently fully promote democratic practices in its online space.* In order to test this hypothesis, I will analyse the EP's Web 2.0 presence against a modified version of four out of Dahl's five points:

- *Effective Participation:* to what extent does the EP use Web 2.0 for citizen participation and are these appropriate mechanisms for gaining views?

- *Enlightened understanding:* to what extent does the EP use Web 2.0 to provide information to citizens and increase public understanding of current issues?

- *Control of the agenda:* to what extent do citizens have the opportunity to influence the EP's agenda through Web 2.0?

- *Inclusion of adults:* to what extent does the EP's use of Web 2.0 promote greater inclusion of groups who are harder to reach by ordinary means? Here I will work on the premise that Web 2.0 communication targets an adult audience (in the region of 18-24 years old) which is not so easily engaged via other, existing channels of communication. Therefore in combination with existing channels, Web 2.0 could help to increase the overall level of inclusion.

The condition of equality in voting will not be considered in the analysis, as the EU doesn't currently use any form of e-voting, and the other aspect which could be considered, online election campaigning, falls outside my scope, since the literature on this topic is huge and impossible to cover in a single chapter.

Since the criteria of participation and enlightened understanding could be considered to have some overlap in meaning, participation will be defined for the purposes of this study as follows: Participation is a multidimensional phenomenon

(Sæbø et al. 2008), but it is recognised that there are three main indicators of civic participation: electoral turn-out, the interest in political issues (not only in relation to political parties) and actions taken in response to a public issue which seek to find solutions to social problems (Livingstone and Markham 2008, pp.351-352). For the purposes of this paper, examples of political participation would include political discussions with friends or strangers, signing an online petition or creating or joining some form of online campaign on a public issue.

4. The European Parliament's Web 2.0 strategy

Before going on to analyse the EP's Web 2.0 presence, it is worth briefly mentioning their communications strategy for the medium. The European Parliament's communications strategies attempt to include all possible means, from national media to a single European public sphere, but reaching EU citizens is still failing, as shown by the results of the bi-annual Eurobarometer survey (2011, p.21), which show that the majority of EU citizens feel they are ill informed about the EU. Since the lack of coverage of EU issues in the media of individual Member States is a well-known problem, the EU has launched and supported several initiatives in an attempt to create a pan-European media, the most notable of these being Euronews and EuroparlTV. Euronews, however, has not yet managed to address a wide and collective public within the EU, partly because of language barriers but also because of cultural differences in the perception of journalism and news gathering. EuroparlTV, on the other had, has been described as a technological innovation, but suffers from a distinct lack of journalistic weight. (EP Report 2010).

The need for some substantial alternative EU media to reach a broader public spectrum therefore remained. With the emergence of Web 2.0 and its associated new communication technologies, and the increasing number of politicians and institutions using them to engage in citizen dialogue through these channels, the European Parliament recognised this development as a potential opportunity to combat the communications gap. The EP launched its first Facebook page in 2009 to coincide with the Parliamentary elections, and amassed 50,000 Facebook fans in the days preceding the election, a number which has grown steadily since (Clark 2010,

p. 40). Today, there are numerous EU-related Facebook pages, ranging from from institutions to policies to single cases or issues.[1] According to Fleishman and Hillard (2011) 69% of MEPs now use social networks extensively and 61% view social media as an effective communication tool. Beside MEPs, political parties and groups also have their own social media presences making it safe to say that there is an active political social media ecosystem in existence on Facebook.

The EP recognises five potentials of new ICTs (EP Report 2010):

- Social media can reach new audiences who have no interest in conventional media channels. These audiences expect not only to have access to media but to respond to it, and to share and use the information provided. To reach these audiences the EP must be where the conversation takes place i.e. Facebook, Twitter and other online social networks.

- Social media allow for dialogue with citizens on the purpose of the EU.

- Online communication through social media signals openness to engage actively in online debate and discussion.

- Social media has potential to communicate with young people, an age group that the EU has traditionally found particularly hard to reach.

However, even when communicating through these new media, the EP has a set of values which must be strictly complied to. EU news coverage must be impartial, objective, factual, independent and professional, which are thought to be central prerequisites for generating pan-European debate and creating a European public sphere. In addition, all administrators have to follow the Staff Regulations and the Code of Good Administrative Behaviour in the same way as for participation in other types of media (European Commission, n.d.).

5. Methodology

In order to assess Web 2.0 technology's effect on the democratic process, three of the EP's main social media channels could be assessed with respect to the

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1 For a list of EU presences on Facebook see http://europa.eu/take-part/facebook/index_en.htm

four democratic criteria established above. The table below details the research necessary to evaluate the contribution of three Web 2.0 media channels to each of the four criteria. As noted by Mergel (2012, p.48) qualitative measurements are generally much more useful than quantitative for gauging the actual impact of any public sector Web 2.0 presence. Also, although it could be argued that online Web 2.0 media could facilitate or encourage offline forms of participation as well as online forms, it was not practical for the purposes of this study to examine offline participation since it would be almost impossible to trace an offline action to an online, Web 2.0 driven, cause.

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Participation	How are users participating in the discussion of EP issues? Qualitative and quantitative analysis of comments and likes/shares for timeline posts. Separate analysis of monthly live chats (looking at participants, topics covered, and level of interaction).	Do other users retweet or respond to EuroParl tweets? Do they tweet about EP events/issues? Search for mentions/retweets.	Do the EP's videos' content promote participation/discussion? Qualitiative analysis of video content and comments sections.
Understanding	What issues are being covered and how are they presented? Qualitative analysis of the topic and content of timeline posts and monthly chats (checking against comments and likes for how well/poorly the message is received). Analysis of the information provided on the "about" page and other links from the front page.	What issues are being covered and how are they presented? Qualitative analysis of the topic and content of tweets (taking the number of followers as indication that the tweets are being read).	What issues are being covered and how are they presented? Qualitative analysis of video content/topic, checking against the number of views, and comments/responses.

Agenda	Is there evidence of user-led agenda setting? Qualitative analysis of timeline posts, comments and live chat records to assess whether the EP takes any action based on user comments or allows users to alter the direction of discussions.	Is there evidence of user-led agenda setting? Qualitative analysis of tweets/retweets. Are they influenced by other users?	Is there evidence of user-led agenda setting? Do the videos seem to respond to any comments/issues raised by other users? Does the EP channel answer comments?
Inclusion	What is the main user demographic? Facebook insight statistics show the top user demographics for visitors to the EP Facebook page.	What is the main user demographic? Analysis of followers could reveal a rough idea of demographic, but would have to be assessed manually since no tool is available.	What is the main user demographic? YouTube statistics show the top 3 demographic groups for each video (this is less reliable however, since signing in is not required to view videos and not all users will include their age or gender).

Due to the limited length of this paper, I am able to assess only one of the three media channels from the table above. For my main content analysis, therefore, I have chosen to focus on the EP's Facebook profile. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, it is the single largest social media network in existence today, with around 955 million active users, and 552 million who log in at least once a day (Facebook Newsroom, n.d.). It is also the most popular channel of the EP's online presence, as measured by the number of pageviews and followers, leading Stephen Clark (head of EP web communication) to call it "the largest stable community dedicated to EU political issues" (Clark 2010, p.44).

Secondly, Facebook typifies many aspects of Web 2.0: it is a social network, formed from horizontal connections between individuals and groups; it emphasises interconnectivity, and is integrated and compatible (via embeds, plug-ins and

widgets) with many other major Web 2.0 applications, including YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and blogs, and even with Web 1.0 sites such as news websites; all content is either created by users (in the form of comments, messages, posts, photos, and status updates) or pulled from other sources (such as YouTube, Flickr, Blogs or news sites); the site's design is relatively simple but its features are constantly being developed and updated; it contains a vast amount of interactive apps, tools and games; and it allows users to rate almost anything on the site (comments, posts, events, photos, videos, status updates) via the "like" mechanism. By "liking" an item, the user adds their name to a list of others who liked the same item which is shown below the source item, and also adds that item to a list of likes on the users profile. Users can also "share" items, allowing them to re-post items either to their own profile, to that of a friend, to that of a group, or to another user in a private message.

Another reason to choose Facebook for this analysis is its user base. Like most social media, the majority of Facebook users fall within the 18-24 age bracket, and visitors to the EP Facebook page follow this trend (EP facebook page, n.d.). Since this study considers whether social media can help to engage young, disengaged citizens, it makes sense to examine a site used by young people, as an oppose to, say, LinkedIn, where 47% of users in the EP group describe their position as either senior, manager, owner or director, suggesting a higher level of both education and socio-economic status, which in turn implies greater political participation (LinkedIn, n.d.).

Although Facebook was originally created for individual users, it has since been adapted to allow the creation of "Pages" for local businesses or places; companies, organisations and institutions; brands or products; artists, bands or public figures; entertainment channels; and causes and communities, giving such users a more suitable platform for accessing the Facebook community. The EP's Facebook profile is an example of one of these Pages, and has some features not found on other Facebook accounts. Besides the Timeline (the main page, a combined version of what was called the Wall and the Profile prior to early 2012) where posts are recorded in reverse chronological order, rather like a blog, and the usual About, Maps and Events pages, the EP's Facebook page includes apps which provide a list

of MEP's Facebook pages, searchable by country, party, and name, and another which hosts and archives live chat sessions, held roughly twice a month with MEPs as guests to answer users' questions on a given topic. The timeline also contains a Recommendations panel which allows users to leave general comments or suggestions on any topic. In addition it has integrated links to other EP social media such as Twitter and Flickr.

When analysing the site, the comments on the 25 posts made during the month from July 17th to August 17th 2012 were counted and categorised as either Positive on-topic, Positive off-topic, Negative on-topic, Negative off-topic, Neutral on-topic or Neutral off-topic. The results are shown in the table in appendix 1. In terms of coding, a comment was considered Positive if it was either expressing positive sentiment about the topic of the post commented on or the EU/EP in general, or if it was a constructive response to a question posed in the post. A comment was classed as Negative if it expressed negative sentiment or unqualified criticism of the EU/EP or the topic of the post. Neutral comments fell in between these, and expressed neither distinctly positive, negative or constructive arguments. Only comments which responded explicitly to the topic of the post where counted as on-topic, whereas comments which dealt with other topics; those which commented on the photo attached to the post without reference to the topic or text of the post and those which mentioned the topic only to lead into an unrelated criticism of the EU/EP were classed as off-topic. An exception to this was made for comments on new cover photos, since there is no text attached to these photos.

Only comments written in english were analysed, and those by the EP Facebook account (thanking a photo's author, adding a link to more information, or warning a user for inappropriate behaviour) were disregarded. It should also be noted that although the EP Facebook administrators have a very lenient moderating policy[2], they do delete offensive, obscene and racist comments, so the actual number of negative comments is likely to be slightly higher than that recorded. Ten bi-monthly chat sessions (going back to October 2011) were analysed, but only qualitatively, since the majority of the posts were questions, which do not easily fit into positive and negative categories, and for this study the quality and depth of the

2   See EP Facebook moderation policy: http://www.facebook.com/note.php?
    note_id=10150486108687852

participation is more important than simply the number of positive and negative comments.

6. Content Analysis

The timeline posts themselves are usually as short as three to four sentences, and often contain at least one question clearly intended to promote discussion (for example: "What subject would get your signature?" - on the European Citizens' Initiative, or "What are the biggest challenges for you at the moment?" - on world youth day and youth unemployment). Although, due to their short length, the posts typically contain very little information, they do almost always include a link to more information, usually on the main Europarl website, but also on external sites. The EP Facebook shares some content with the "news" section of the Europarl website (albeit in shorter form) but it also posts content not issued through other EP media channels, such as reminders on travel rules for pets or posts on water conservation. The majority of the posts were about regulations passed by the EP, with a link to more information, though there are also three posts in the form of service announcements (for the EP mobile website, the Europeans Citizens' Initiative and the Citizens' Conference) and five posts not directly related to the EU or EP at all (on the London Olympics, a Summer music playlist and reading suggestions).

Five out of the twenty-five posts analysed contained embedded video, and those which didn't included a photo (or in one case an infographic) loosely connected to the post's topic. All of the posts are written in an informal and conversational manner, as is fitting to social media, and often open with a rhetorical question. While this is clearly intended to be a way of breaking the formality of a post which, more often than not, is issuing public information, it may come across to some users as patronising or insincere, since the EP is obviously not actually wanting users to answer the question, and doesn't engage in true conversation by responding directly to any of the comments.

The comments sections of timeline posts appear to be the first place most users go to participate. These posts receive an average of 30 comments (in English) each, mostly within hours of being posted, though the number of new comments

drops dramatically after a day, with comments only very rarely being posted more than 24 hours after the original post. This shows that the majority of users participate only in very recent posts, and are unlikely to browse the archives, which makes sense, considering that Facebook works by updating each user's live feed in realtime as the posts are uploaded, and that more than half of active users access Facebook at least once per day. The comments on timeline posts are far more likely to be Negative or Neutral than Positive (23 % Positive, 30 % Negative, 47 % Neutral) – on just four out of the 25 posts analysed were there the same or more Positive comments than both Negative and Neutral, compared to 11 where the greatest number of comments were Negative. Comments were also more likely to be off-topic than on-topic (57 % to 43 %).

A possible reason for this disparity is the number of different ways users participated in the comments section: to contribute to the discussion of the post's topic, making EU/EP-related suggestions and requests unrelated to the topic of the post, to express their general satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the EU/EP, to share media coverage of various EU-related and global events, and to promote their individual interests (personal or local issues, personal philosophies, petitions, blogs, Facebook groups, business ads, and at least one personal ad). Another clear reason for a lot of negative comments was that users felt that most of the issues represented in the timeline posts were extremely trivial in comparison with the greater issues faced by EU member states and individual citizens.

A large portion of comments were made by a small number of users: although the number of comments per user was not counted as part of the analysis for practical reasons, it was noticed that an estimated 20-30 % of comments on each post were made by one of a group of around five users. These users commented regularly (on almost every post analysed), and repeatedly (some made more than four comments per post). They were also more involved in terms of being more likely to respond to other users comments and start discussions. They were also more likely to express negative and critical attitudes towards the EP and EU (only one of these frequent commenters stood out as being overly supportive of EU goals), and less likely to make constructive comments.

Constructive comments were made by large numbers of users on several

posts, particularly those on topics which users seemed to connect strongly with. On these posts there was also less comments to the effect that the post content was trivial or unimportant. Out of the posts analysed, those on youth unemployment, online data privacy and online consumer protection had the most positive receptions by commenters. These three posts all had well above the average numbers of likes and shares per post, and two of the three (youth unemployment and data privacy) also had well above the average percentage of on topic and positive responses, although there was not enough evidence to establish a conclusive connection between these figures and the overall public response seen in the comments. This highlights the previously stated importance of qualitative rather than quantitative review of Web 2.0 initiatives.

The EP's bi-monthly online chat sessions are usually forty-five minutes long, and are advertised through various channels, including the EP Facebook timeline, the EP Twitter feed, the main Europarl page, and sometimes the individual web pages of national EP information offices. There is some inconsistency in when and how the chats are advertised beforehand, which may cause lower numbers of attendance than would otherwise be the case. There is a different "guest chatter" each month, who is usually (but not always) an MEP, and answers questions on a set topic. The guests are knowledgeable in their subject area, and usually heavily involved in EP working groups or committees in that field. They offer a first-hand, insider view of issues, and present their own personal opinions, backed up by reasoning. Some popular guests, such as Jerzy Buzek and Martin Schultz, have been featured more than once. Due to restraints of time, and the format of the chat, not all questions can be answered, and both question and answer are limited in length. As in the comments section on timeline posts, participants sometimes direct comments at each other (rather than towards the EP or the guest), fuelling separate but parallel discussions on the topic at hand.

Links to external websites with further information can be included in questions and in answers, and these are utilised regularly to supplement the shorter answers given during the chat. Photos of the guest are also uploaded and posted in the chat in realtime, and typically show the guest at a computer with a caption such as: "President Schulz answers the first question". Although relatively meaningless in

content, and while these do not directly aid the participation, they do make good use of Web 2.0's ability to respond to events and give immediate, realtime feedback. This in turn offers the chat's participants added transparency – reinforcement of the personal and direct connection with their political representative; and increases the sense of immediacy – users see everything as it happens, strengthening the instantaneous feedback loop created by the live chat session.

Facebook users, whether taking part in the chat or merely observing (even after the event) can "like" individual comments, questions, answers, and even photos in the chat. Not only does this add another level of participation, it comes close to a form of folksonomy (which would be more valid if users were able to filter the questions and answers by number of likes). One user even comments in a chat, suggesting an updated version of the chat system in which participants would vote for the questions they would like to see answered[3]. While such a system could work well, it would also be susceptible to sabotage by large numbers of users voting maliciously for irrelevant questions. As with all Web 2.0 technology, the extent to which it can be used to its fullest extent by any organisation is dependent on the willingness of the organisation in question to give up some control of their online space. While complete lack of control is undesirable, giving up some control is necessary (in the words of the same user) "if the EU is planning on really listening to its people, and not stage (*sic*) pointless chats in which democracy is mimed"(chat date 26/04/2012).

Despite these limitations, the chat sessions are lively and the users who participate in them seem well-informed about current EP issues as well as the general workings of the EU institutions. Their comments are mostly on topic and indicate support of the EU's and EP's goals. A likely reason for this difference from the commenters on the timeline posts is that to participate in the chat requires more effort than to post a comment (the user must locate the chat page, give the app permission to run, and, most importantly, make time to participate at the time of the chat – whereas a comment can be posted at any time directly from the front page),

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3 "I would suggest in the future for a more complex chatting system, in which people may impose the questions that get answered by voting on them. That way the questions that are more pressing to us, the people, could be heard. I recommend this if the EU is planning on really listening to its people, and not stage pointless chats in which democracy is mimed" (chat date 26/04/2012)

so people who attend the chat sessions are likely to be more interested in EU-related matters and more politically involved to begin with. Another possible reason for the lower proportion of insulting or outright negative comments is the fact that users are aware that there is an identifiable person receiving (and responding to) the messages in realtime, and so are more self-restrained than when commenting on the anonymously run timeline posts.

The number of participants on a chat varies from session to session (from 30 questions on one chat to 408 on another across the chats analysed), and the fame or reputation of the host is a clear factor in this – chats with Buzek and Schulz had far higher numbers of participants. Some participants take part in the chat sessions regularly, but the majority take part in just one chat, most likely based on the topics they have an interest in. The topics themselves vary from session to session, but recurring topics include possible solutions to the financial crisis in the eurozone, human rights issues (especially regarding the Arab Spring) and visions of the future of the EU. These are entirely different to the topics addressed in the timeline posts during the period monitored (although that period was much shorter for the timeline posts), and could constitute yet another reason why the chats are generally much better received.

Overall, responses to the chat sessions were positive, with many participants expressing their thanks at the close of each session, and one guest, Othmar Karas MEP (chat date 26/06/2012), noted that new media play an important role in forming connections between politicians and citizens. Jan Zahradil MEP (chat date 26/10/2011), on the other hand, wrote that although he himself was participating in the chat session to get closer to EU citizens, that in his opinion the real problem was lack of interest in EU affairs in the mainstream media, leading to lack of interest and awareness among EU citizens. Some participants expressed frustration that their questions and comments were not answered, and others felt that the questions were not answered in enough depth. On occasion the EP Facebook administrator (who moderates the chats, welcomes the guests, introduces the topics, and thanks everyone for participating at the end) stepped in to clarify that only on-topic comments would be answered, or to ask people to be patient.

Apart from the live chats, the EP Facebook page has a number of other small

modules which could be seen to contribute towards improving democracy through e-participation, and so are worth mentioning briefly. Some of these features, such as the about page, and the Sakharov prize page, are essentially Web 1.0 structures attached to the Facebook page and serve merely to provide information. Others, such as the links to the EP's Twitter and Flickr web pages, make use of Web 2.0's connectivity to integrate the EP Web presence and direct users through their Facebook portal to other media channels. The EP Facebook page also includes interactive and searchable lists of both MEPs and regional EP Information Offices, which facilitate and encourage online and offline political participation by making it easy for users to locate and contact their local representatives both on social media websites and in the real world. The recommendations module at the top right of the timeline allows users to leave general comments for the EP, without a post to dictate the topic of communication, and allowing users to set their own agendas. There are currently about five comments made per day using this feature, but there is no evidence of the EP web team in any way responding to these comments, nor do other users typically form conversations or discussions within this section.

7. Findings

To better judge the implications of the EP's Facebook presence for promoting citizen participation and communication, the findings of the content analysis are presented below in the context of our modified democratic criteria.

Participation: Users can and do actively engage in political participation via the EP's Facebook page in a number of ways and on many levels. Firstly and foremost, they comment on timeline posts, expressing their views and opinions, and promoting their interests. Furthermore, they engage in discussion or debate with other users from across the EU (and indeed the world) in this space. Through the live chat sessions, users participate by communicating directly with MEPs, asking questions and sharing opinions on the issue chosen for that chat. This creates new modes of interaction with elected representatives in near real-time, which for most people would be very difficult by other means (especially contacting MEPs from another country). It is very convenient and informal, which breaks two barriers that might normally hinder political participation, and it increases the frequency of

communication between citizens and politicians. The guest is usually very involved in the topic discussed and also gets feedback and public opinions on the topic which could help gauge the public reaction to that issue.

Users also participate by liking or sharing a timeline post or comment, thus bringing it to the attention of their network of friends and raising awareness of the EP. In addition, by providing an easy method for users to locate and contact local MEPs and Information Offices, the EP's Facebook page enables greater levels of participation with them and encourages users to be more involved in local EP-run events and programmes. Lastly, users leave comments addressed directly to the EP, either through the comments sections of posts, or the Recommendations section. This could be seen to be a less effective form of participation than discussion with other users, since there is no evidence of a feedback mechanism, or that the messages have any influence at all on the EP or its workings.

This lack of feedback is one of the main failings of the the EP's Facebook presence as a tool for raising citizen engagement. The EP doesn't give any feedback to inform participants that their opinions were taken into account or had any impact. There is little or no evidence of crowd-sourcing being used effectively, despite this aspect being one of Web 2.0's greatest assets, allowing citizens' opinions to be gathered quickly and directly. Neither are there progress updates on any policy which would indicate citizen input or advice had been taken into account – in fact, most policies (with the one notable exception of ACTA) were only posted about after the EP had passed them, preventing users' from having any input on the decision-making process. While user-input need not go so far as co-drafting policies, their opinions should at least be taken into account in a formal and transparent way.

This lack of feedback to reinforce the political participation which is taking place could harm rather than aid the perceived transparency of the EP's decision-making processes, and could give users the impression that their participation was a waste of time. Some citizens do indeed use this online space for expressing their frustrations, and as can be seen by the large number of negative and off-topic comments, many users perceive that although the EP publicly encourages participation, their input doesn't have any visible influence, and the EP doesn't even respond to comments to reinforce the conversational nature of the medium.

*Understanding***:** The topics covered in the EP's timeline posts and chat sessions promote understanding of EU issues and debates, and usually attempt to present them in ways that are appealing and easy to grasp. The amount of information immediately available is, however, very limited and could be more extensive. Links in the posts and chat help users to find further information on the given topics, but this information requires more effort to find on the users behalf, and so will be viewed less often and, as the links are mostly to the Europarl website, that information comes mainly from one source. The number of likes, comments and shares on timeline posts do indicate that the information provided by the EP is widely shared. Users' discussions between themselves, and the comments they leave could promote understanding by creating an open database of opinion and information, though it must be considered that, as noted in the literature, this also enables the rapid spread of misinformation, especially if it appears to be sanctioned by the EP. The thoughts and opinions of elected representatives are also missing from timeline posts, as links to all sides of any argument would promote greater understanding.

Agenda setting: As noted in the content analysis, there is no real provision established for agenda setting through the EP Facebook page, despite the opportunities it affords. This was another clear reason for a lot of negative comments - users felt that most of the issues represented in the timeline posts were extremely trivial in comparison with the greater issues faced by EU member states and individual citizens which are not reflected on the EP's Facebook page, where minor problems are pointed out and discussed instead. At most, users can make a comment on any topic of their choice in the hope of starting a discussion with other users on the matter. Such comments are made often, but rarely lead anywhere, and in the Recommendations section, the one area where there is no dictated topic of discussion, users do not normally start conversations. This suggests that perhaps a more accessible space dedicated to user-led discussion, such as an open forum, might be required to better fulfil this requirement. Currently the EP Facebook presence has not altered the relationship between citizens and the EP, as there is no evidence of demand-led policy-making, or citizen-centric governance emerging.

Inclusion: In terms of equality of inclusion, Facebook is a very good medium

for the EP. Although the previously described problem of the digital divide remains and language is still a barrier, the EP Facebook page attracts a huge number of citizens from across the EU, especially young people (18-24) – the target group which is typically the least politically engaged with the EP. On top of its 382,579 fans (at time of writing), the EP reaches many more users through their friends. Although this alone is not a solution to disengagement (which would require a shift in attitude from both citizens and institutions), it is a new and widely-used channel and therefore increases democratic inclusion.

8. Conclusion

The question then, is how does this match up with the perceived potential of Web 2.0 for e-participation? Although the EP Facebook both communicates outwards (primarily in the form of posts) and accepts incoming communication (in the form of comments), the two rarely meet in the form of conversation, with the exception of the live chats. There is ample opportunity for this to extend to other parts of Facebook, such as the timeline, which would greatly enhance the user experience by creating a truer form of conversation, but this would obviously require a larger number of staff and political representation to be involved. The participation of MEPs or EU representatives would also go a long way to enhance the quality and importance of this conversation.

The page's contribution to understanding is, on the other hand, quite large, making a huge amount of information available equally to a large number of users through a variety of channels all integrated into and linked from the EP Facebook page, although more information should be made available, especially prior to decisions being made. Agenda setting is the point on which the page really fails to deliver. Despite the potential of Web 2.0 recognised in the literature, and the facilities Facebook offers for allowing users to set agendas (e.g. comments, polls, likes), this has not to date been taken up through the EP's Facebook page. Other online initiatives promoted through the EP Facebook page, such as the Citizens' Conference, and the European Citizens' Initiative may meet this criteria better, but these fall outwith the scope of this paper. In short, the three main problems identified are:

- There is a lack of feedback to users, and users' participation is not formally integrated into any part of the policy-making process, resulting in weakened interaction and a lack of transparency.
- The information provided lacks substance and opinion, limiting full understanding of the issues dealt with and their implications.
- There is an absence of pre-policy crowd-sourcing, and user-led agenda setting, preventing policy-making from meeting users' individual and group needs.

This confirms the hypothesis that *the EP's use of Web 2.0 technology does not currently fully promote democratic practices in its online space*. Out of the challenges for governments described in the literature review, lack of staffing appears to be the main reason preventing the EP from taking full advantage of Facebook's potential, though existing cultural and managerial perceptions of ICTs may also be an issue, as the EP uses Facebook mostly to transmit information in a similar way as it would though Web 1.0 technologies, and appears to fear losing control of its online space. It is also possible that the EP administration guidelines are too restrictive for these media. In light of this, future research should aim to discover what factors are preventing the full use of social media for improved citizen engagement. Surveys of the managerial attitudes of administrators and policy makers would be beneficial to this end, as would surveys of users' experience with the EP Facebook page.

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Appendix 1: Analysis of comments on timeline posts

Date of Post	Date of Analysis	Topic	Likes	Shares	Positive/On-Topic	Negative/On-Topic	Neutral/On-Topic	Positive/Off-Topic	Negative/Off-Topic	Neutral/Off-Topic	Total Comments
17/07/12	17/08/12	online consumer protection	622	231	5	3	3	2	3	18	34
18/07/12	18/08/12	airline blacklist	477	284	3	7	2	2	5	51	70
19/07/12	18/08/12	Burgas bombing-Schultz statement	225	83	0	0	1	1	1	16	19
20/07/12	18/08/12	EU Summer playlist pt.1	68	19	11	0	0	2	3	2	18
23/07/12	17/08/12	single european sky/ flying	153	67	18	2	4	0	2	6	32
24/07/12	17/08/12	roaming charges	439	103	3	1	10	2	1	11	28
25/07/12	15/08/12	online data privacy	426	255	10	1	9	0	2	7	29
26/07/12	18/08/12	EU Summer playlist pt.2	67	33	7	1	2	2	0	5	17
27/07/12	15/08/12	MEP reading tips	166	33	6	0	1	0	3	8	18
30/07/12	13/08/12	Schultz – first 6 months video	75	22	3	4	3	0	12	3	25
30/07/12	13/08/12	Olympics 2012	506	261	0	1	4	2	7	3	17
31/07/12	17/08/12	clean water map	139	80	1	0	3	1	4	2	11
01/08/12	13/08/12	natural resources conservation	566	207	4	11	9	0	5	4	33
02/08/12	17/08/12	EP mobile website	103	25	1	5	0	0	5	1	12
03/08/12	13/08/12	EU Summer playlist final	96	35	2	3	9	0	3	6	23
06/08/12	18/08/12	cover photo	117	2	1	1	0	1	3	4	10
07/08/12	18/08/12	EU health insurance card	109	40	1	2	1	0	1	11	16
08/08/12	14/08/12	travelling with pets	765	638	1	0	4	5	14	4	28
09/08/12	15/08/12	saving water	128	58	7	4	5	1	7	16	40
12/08/12	14/08/12	youth day/unemployment	1004	859	17	12	8	6	13	16	72
13/08/12	13/08/12	European's citizen's initiative	244	80	2	2	5	4	9	6	28
13/08/12	17/08/12	cover photo	131	3	2	3	1	0	6	4	16
16/08/12	17/08/12	CAP/citizen's conference	211	93	9	12	4	0	6	7	38
16/08/12	17/08/12	traineeship/disabilities	258	69	6	0	1	1	2	7	17
17/08/12	18/08/12	EP visitor centre	209	58	2	4	1	2	6	8	23

Date of Post	Date of Analysis	Topic	% Positive	% Negative	% Neutral	% On Topic	% Off Topic
17/07/12	17/08/12	online consumer protection	20.59%	17.65%	61.76%	32.35%	67.65%
18/07/12	18/08/12	airline blacklist	7.14%	17.14%	75.71%	17.14%	82.86%
19/07/12	18/08/12	Burgas bombing-Schultz statement	5.26%	5.26%	89.47%	5.26%	94.74%
20/07/12	18/08/12	EU Summer playlist pt.1	72.22%	16.67%	11.11%	61.11%	38.89%
23/07/12	17/08/12	single european sky/ flying	56.25%	12.50%	31.25%	75.00%	25.00%
24/07/12	17/08/12	roaming charges	17.86%	7.14%	75.00%	50.00%	50.00%
25/07/12	15/08/12	online data privacy	34.48%	10.34%	55.17%	68.97%	31.03%
26/07/12	18/08/12	EU Summer playlist pt.2	52.94%	5.88%	41.18%	58.82%	41.18%
27/07/12	15/08/12	MEP reading tips	33.33%	16.67%	50.00%	38.89%	61.11%
30/07/12	13/08/12	Schultz – first 6 months video	12.00%	64.00%	24.00%	40.00%	60.00%
30/07/12	13/08/12	Olympics 2012	11.76%	47.06%	41.18%	29.41%	70.59%
31/07/12	17/08/12	clean water map	18.18%	36.36%	45.45%	36.36%	63.64%
01/08/12	13/08/12	natural resources conservation	12.12%	48.48%	39.39%	72.73%	27.27%
02/08/12	17/08/12	EP mobile website	8.33%	83.33%	8.33%	50.00%	50.00%
03/08/12	13/08/12	EU Summer playlist final	8.70%	26.09%	65.22%	60.87%	39.13%
06/08/12	18/08/12	cover photo	20.00%	40.00%	40.00%	20.00%	80.00%
07/08/12	18/08/12	EU health insurance card	6.25%	18.75%	75.00%	25.00%	75.00%
08/08/12	14/08/12	travelling with pets	21.43%	50.00%	28.57%	17.86%	82.14%
09/08/12	15/08/12	saving water	20.00%	27.50%	52.50%	40.00%	60.00%
12/08/12	14/08/12	youth day/unemployment	31.94%	34.72%	33.33%	51.39%	48.61%
13/08/12	13/08/12	European's citizen's initiative	21.43%	39.29%	39.29%	32.14%	67.86%
13/08/12	17/08/12	cover photo	12.50%	56.25%	31.25%	37.50%	62.50%
16/08/12	17/08/12	CAP/citizen's conference	23.68%	47.37%	28.95%	65.79%	34.21%
16/08/12	17/08/12	traineeship/disabilities	41.18%	11.76%	47.06%	41.18%	58.82%
17/08/12	18/08/12	EP visitor centre	17.39%	43.48%	39.13%	30.43%	69.57%