Social Network Sites: An Innovative Form Of Political Communication? A Socio-Technical Approach To Media Innovation

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the interrelations between social media technology and users in order to assess whether and how actors drive innovation. I am interested in understanding how social media technology configures users, how users reconfigure technologies to meet their needs and what users do *with* social media technology. The mainstream perspective on politicians who use social media has been based on the premise that social media technology is, by nature, an innovative tool and that politicians are not using it to its full potential. However I argue that technology is not innovative by nature and further that emerging practices are actually accompanying the use of social media by political actors but that those practices are related to the collaborative production of speech and rearrangement of editorial rules in political communication. Thus the bulk of the paper is devoted to showing that, through the use of social media technology, media and political communication are converging. The article builds upon examples from the use of social media technology by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). I provide empirical insights into how Members of the European Parliament and their staff adapt to social media technology while using it in a creative way and how uses contribute to changes in the technology itself. This article is empirically grounded and aims at providing examples to highlight the role of actors in defining and developing innovation in the field of media technology. The argument of the paper is that innovation in media technology takes place at the level of practices. Yet new and old practices are

interfering as more established practices meet social media technology, challenging the notion of newness and pointing out to the role and influence of the institutional context on innovation. This article finally outlines some of the existing claims made for the innovative potential of social media regarding politics and lays out a number of issues and questions that should lead us to be wary about celebratory accounts.

Introduction

This article's objective is to explore the interrelations between social media technology and users in order to assess whether and how actors drive innovation. Technology and users are inevitably intertwined. Ellison and boyd (2013:166) argue that "social network sites are socio-technical systems, in which social and technical factors shape one another" while Bijker, Hughes and Pinch (1987) note that technological systems are socially constructed through usage. In this paper, I am interested in understanding how social media technology¹ configures users, how users reconfigure technologies to meet their needs, and what users do *with* social media technology. The mainstream perspective on politicians who use social media has been based on the premise that social media technology is, by nature, an innovative political tool and that politicians are not using it to its full potential (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Strandberg, 2013). However I argue that technology is not innovative by nature and further that emerging practices are actually accompanying the use of social media by political actors but that those practices are related to the collaborative production of speech and rearrangement of editorial rules in political communication. Thus the bulk of the paper is devoted to showing that, through the use of social media technology, media and political communication are converging.

The article builds upon examples from the use of social media technology by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Why look at politicians? Crawford highlights that politicians are particularly keen on using social media platforms; she thus notes that "popularity of social media increases amongst politicians"

¹ In this article, I use interchangeably the terms "social media" and "social network sites". Coutant and Stenger (2012) note that the dissemination of the expression "social media" coincides with the creation of social network sites. Social network sites are indeed part of the field of "social media," a concept that lacks clarity but usually defines "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Ellison & boyd, 2013:158).

(2009:530). There is a general injunction, coming from public institutions and professionals in the media system, such as journalists and so-called social media experts but also from the academic world for politicians to use web 2.0 tools in order to interact with citizens and allow for the emergence of a deliberative democracy (Roginsky, 2014). Blumler and Coleman (2010:147) note that “with the emergence and evolution of the Internet, in its many shapes and guises, there has been a range of hopes and speculations about its redemptive potential”. At the European level, this belief is even stronger. Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2011) emphasize the potential the Internet offers for legitimizing the European Parliament as a democratic institution. In a resolution entitled “On journalism and new media – creating a public sphere in Europe”, a majority of Members of the European Parliament agrees that:

social media are particularly adequate for communication: 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, share and use information; To reach these audiences, one 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. (Løkkegaard, 2010)

The research question leads us to assess whether the use of social network sites (SNSs) by political actors at the European level presents some form of media and communication innovation. SNSs are new tools of communication, especially in the realm of European politics, but do they bring new forms of communication, and do political users use SNSs in an innovative way – enhancing changes in the technology itself? In what follows, I first elaborate on the theoretical framework of the research and the methodological approach. On this basis, I provide empirical insights into how Members of the European Parliament and their staff adapt to social media technology while using it in a creative way and how uses contribute to changes in the technology itself. This article is empirically grounded and aims at providing examples to highlight the role of actors in defining and developing innovation in the field of media technology. I will then turn to practices as the argument of the paper is that innovation in media technology takes place at the level of practices. Yet new and old practices are interfering as more established practices meet social media technology, challenging the notion of newness and pointing out to the role and influence of the institutional context on innovation. This article finally outlines some of the existing claims made for the innovative potential of social media regarding politics and lays out a number of issues and questions that should lead us to be wary about celebratory accounts.

Theoretical framework

For Flichy (2007), users' action fits into a socio-technical framework. The social-technical approach to the use of technology states that technological and social aspects are directly related (Olivera & Watson-Manheim, 2013) and therefore they should be looked at together, taking into account the context in which they develop (Vedel, 1994). Such an approach examines the interaction between actors and technology as part of a larger social and technical system in which the development and use of the focal technology is embedded (Kling & Scacchi, 1982:3). In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of social interactions in affecting the use of social media technology. Use of technology is therefore socially constructed. As reminded by Hine, Internet users are dually "involved in the construction of the technology: through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce" (2000:38). She argues a dual focus for Internet research on "technology development" as "social process" and on "technology appropriation" (2009:3). Technologies, practices, and contexts indeed have to be explored mutually. Innovation should be understood as a process where technology and social action interact in a specific context. Rogers defines innovation as "an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption. An innovation presents an individual or an organization with a new alternative or alternatives" (Rogers, 1995:xvii). Individual and collective perceptions are therefore crucial in defining innovations. Norbert Alter (2000) posits that the development of innovation does not rely on the invention's intrinsic qualities but rather on individual and collective capacity to give it meaning and usage. Innovation is not necessarily a physical artifact but can imply a change in relationships between actors, as well as processes, impacts and outcomes (Hartley, 2005). Therefore, uses, practices, and perceptions are of prime importance when looking at innovations. However, the argument is that users are not only actors of the technology but also contributors to technology. According to Pooley (2014:237), "users react, adapt and ultimately reshape technologies through their ongoing interactions". In doing so, users drive innovation – with regard both to the technology itself and social practices.

Method and data collection

From a methodological perspective, Steenson notes that approaching innovation with an interactive process perspective implies the utilization of ethnographic approaches that engender accurate observations of workplaces and the actions of individuals engaged in processes of innovation (2009: 824). Furthermore, to get a grip on the relationships between things and processes, ethnography is useful as

it allows the researcher to understand how social media technology is described and discussed among users. It is indeed important to highlight that social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online. The Internet is consecutive with and embedded in other social spaces (Miller & Slater, 2000:5). Hine (2009) notes that the ethnography of the Internet should involve mobility between contexts of production and use and between online and offline. It is about studying the technology itself and the practices that take place as well as understanding the context in which those practices are situated.

To do so, this research adopts an ethnographic perspective which includes a mix of participant observation within the European Parliament, interviews with Members of the European Parliament and their staff, textual readings of profiles and status updates. As a parliamentary assistant between 2009 and 2012 in the European Parliament, I was in the position to conduct thorough participant observation. The period was of particular relevance as it corresponds to the period when Members of the European Parliament were introduced to social media technology² and learned to use it as a daily communication tool. I attended a number of meetings and workshops about the use of social media by MEPs during my time of participant observation. As a parliamentary assistant, I was also involved in a series of informal discussions with other assistants on the use of social media. My insider position gave me the opportunity to interview 40 assistants³, many of them being in charge of social media tools on behalf of their Member of the European Parliament, as well as four Members of the European Parliament. Michon (2008) argues that parliamentary assistants are key political

² See for instance those workshops that were organized to show to MEPs how they could use social media : <https://ypfp.org/blog/2013/10/democracy-twiplomacy-and-accountability-europe-0>

³ The bulk of the interviews were conducted between March 2012 and September 2012, but as this is a long-term research project, further interviews have been added. The selection of the people interviewed was first motivated by the activity on social media by MEPs as recorded by a platform which does not exist anymore ("Tweet your MEPs"). But ethnography, and in particular participant observation, have also allowed me to identify MEPs and staff. Country, age, political group were not variables taken into account, as the research's objective is not comparative. However, it was important to make sure that interviewees were not coming from a single political group, nor a single country (so far interviewees come from the 5 main political groups in the European Parliament and 15 different countries). Questions were asked about the everyday use of social media (who is in charge, who decides what to publish, on what grounds, validation process, differences between platforms, etc.) but also about the objectives, the impact (and how to measure it), the audiences (knowledge of audiences, targeting, replying, etc.), the articulation between social media tools and other communication tools.

actors, even though they remain virtually unstudied (Busby & Belkacem, 2013). Their knowledge of working practices within MEPs' offices as well as their position "in the background" (Michon 2008: 169) provide them with an insightful understanding of how their MEP approaches and uses social media technology and the possibility to speak in a more free way than their employer. Furthermore, my own position as a former parliamentary assistant – therefore a former colleague – contributed in facilitating dialogue. I also collected a series of profiles and status updates on Facebook and Twitter of MEPs that I met, directly or indirectly, and studied their use of those tools both from a communicational and semeiological perspective⁴.

Politicians as users of social media

The bulk of scholarship suggests that most politicians tend to be rather careful in making innovative uses of new technology. Even though the 2008 Obama campaign in the United States is often seen as the beginning of a "new era for the use of the Internet in political campaigns and mark[s] the growing dominance of the medium as a political tool" (MacAskill, 2007: quoted by Miller, 2013:332), Miller notes that all candidates are not Barack Obama and that they should not expect the same results. He points out the various limitations of the tools and recalls that "new media are simply not a less costly alternative to a traditional campaign" (2013: 342). Looking at the use of social media during the 2011 Finnish national elections, Strandberg concludes that the "significance of social media was moderate. Although the candidates' use of social media was large, there was indication of normalization" (2013:1343). The normalization hypothesis suggests that the use of social media within politics reflects existing power relationships (Lilleker et al., 2011); in other words that offline structures shape political activity on the Internet (Vaccari, 2008). Even though Jennifer Stromer-Galley states that "the Internet has properties that make possible increased interaction between citizens and political leaders" (2000:111), she finds that politicians in the US tend to prefer media interaction (i.e. interactions with the medium itself) rather than human interaction (interaction between people through the medium). Nine years later, things do not seem to have changed as Jackson and Lilleker (2009) find that despite the interactive architecture of social media, politicians in the UK have a rather mixed use of the tools. They believe that politicians do not really adhere to a "Web 2.0 style of political

⁴ The interviewees come from fourteen different Member States and various political groups. However, I did not take the country variable into account, nor the political group.

communication” (2009:232). Larsson (2013a:73) concludes that results from a decade of research all over the western world highlight a limited form of participation: “most research into online political communication has given weight to a view of stability and continuity with regards to the usage patterns of political actors”. Most political actors would then assume a somewhat conservative approach to social media. Thus, studying the use of Twitter by Italian politicians, Di Fraia and Missaglia find that “Italian politicians have used improperly this media; more like a mass media rather than a social media” (2014: 76) and they believe that this the reason why Twitter has not played a central role in the political communication of 2013 election campaign. This is also the case outside the time of elections: looking at Scandinavian Members of Parliament, Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) indicate that use levels of both Facebook and Twitter are rather low outside election periods, questioning the concept of “permanent campaign” (Strömbäck, 2007).

Most scholars tend to focus on citizen-politician interaction when studying the use of social media by politicians. But Skovsgaard and Van Dalen (2013) point to the fact that interaction or dialogue with citizens on social media might be overrated. There is a form of discrepancy between expectations from researchers and actual uses of social media by practitioners. In other words, according to D’heer and Verdegem (2014:91) “ideal and actual social media practices do not always correspond”. In this paper, I am therefore interested in looking at “actual” social media practices outside elections time. Larsson (2013a) believes that politicians just like any other agents come up with new and hitherto unforeseen ways of utilizing ICTs. In this regard, they may not use some specific features (what Larsson designates as “pattern of non-use”) but may have an innovative use of others. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the conversations or messages posted on social media venues in order to understand better perceptions and motivations by politicians as users of social media. There is indeed a lack of comprehensive accounts of how politicians perceive social media.

Users as driver of innovation: bricolage and tactical uses of SNSs

Cardon (2005) argues that users contribute to innovation. Rather than being constrained by techniques, they grope and adapt their usage to their objectives. The practical activity is what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) calls *bricolage*. Mérand (2011:183) explains that “*bricolage* is sort of making do. (...) New problems arise in the process which are also addressed by whatever comes to hand. (...) *Bricolage* is the art of invention within the ‘reasonable’ limits by practical knowledge”. The *bricoleur* is someone who adjusts “the protocol to unforeseen events” (Fuglsang, 2010:74), essentially a tactician. For Flichy, this type of activity (like all technological activity) is situated in what he calls a “frame of reference” (2007:80), which can be subdivided into “two distinct but

articulated frames: the frame of functioning and the frame of use” (2007:82). To put it simply, the frame of functioning refers to technical use, while the frame of use refers to the social use. Social network sites’ interfaces play a major role in maneuvering users and uses. The technical proprieties of the device impact forms and substance as well as relationships between users and the devices; this is the frame of functioning. For instance, the platform Twitter enables users to send and read messages that are limited to 140 characters, “so it does limit dialogue”⁵ according to an assistant in charge of social media for a MEP. The technical properties of the platform bring the users to come up with a plan on how to use the platform so it fits their own communication objectives. This is what Flichy calls the frame of use: using the technology for specific social activities. As Twitter is seen as constraining dialogue, it is therefore necessary to find an alternative way to use the platform. Thus, for most politicians, “Twitter is more reaction to what is happening, to what is passing by”⁶. *Bricolage* is then evident in the way in which actors use SNSs. MEPs and their staff have been experimenting social media: from an electoral tool to a permanent communication channel, they have been going through a trial and error period to learn how they could use the technology to fulfil their own objectives. This assistant, for example, explains how he has learned to use pictures as the main communication tool on Facebook: “Maybe one simple thing that has changed since 2009 and up until now is more and more to use images to actually attract likes and use images to attract for important posts”⁷.

It comes back to Chandler’s argument (1998): “Especially in a virtual medium one may reselect and rearrange elements until a pattern emerges which seems to satisfy the constraints of the task and the current purposes of the user”. Users are creative in the way in which they use SNSs, as the example above illustrates. They divert or distort the initial function of the platform. Another example of political actors distorting the initial function of social media which comes to mind is their use of social media platforms as information retrieval and monitoring tools. In doing so, users have developed an innovative use of SNSs, specifically Facebook and Twitter, in the sense that they use it in a way that their inventors did not necessarily foresee: many interviewees explain using Twitter in a more “professional manner”, with journalists as their main target and Facebook as a type of mini blog with the use of pictures and the possibility to have a longitudinal approach to the activities of the politician. “Facebook, it’s much

⁵ Interview 1.

⁶ Interview 2.

⁷ Interview 3.

more the content in a way and activities”⁸ explains a parliamentary assistant. It is what de Certeau (1980) calls “the innovative art” - that is, users act in a way other than what was defined a priori. This seems to be true of Facebook more broadly: when Facebook was launched in February 2004, it began as “a community solely for college students” (Westling, 2007:3). It is now a global social networking website that “allows members to share personal information, opinions, and media” (Westling, 2007:3). More specifically, the way in which politicians use the platform directly influenced some features incorporated into Facebook, such as the timeline, as explained by a representative of Facebook to MEPs and staff:

I know at least two of the new features are some of the features that I specifically lobbied knowing from politicians in governments, from officials across, US, Africa, Europe, that were features they really needed to use.⁹

Therefore even if politicians are not themselves capable of transforming the technology, they nonetheless drive innovation: they initiate the change that is eventually translated into the initial technology by the designers. An innovation may therefore be derived from practice. On this matter, the evolution of Twitter whose tagline changed from “what are you doing?” to “what’s happening?” and today “compose a new tweet” (Rogers, 2013) is another illustration of the evolving uses of the platform which have push forward evolving proprieties of the device. Thus, Rogers writes: “As Jack Dorsey, the Twitter co-founder, phrased it, Twitter also did rather well during disasters and elections, and subsequently became an event-following tool, at once shedding at least in part its image as a what-I-had-for-lunch medium” (2014: ix). Fugslang (2010) argues that ad hoc adjustments become innovations because they gradually change the overall competence characteristics of the apparatus. The Facebook platform, initially a platform for students, became a communication political tool as it integrated new properties that became interesting for politicians. The media technology followed and embraced usages. In this way, Facebook came to more completely fulfil an early description of it by Westling: “Facebook combines the best features of local bulletin boards, newspapers, and town hall meetings, placing them in a single location that is available at any time and in practically any location” (Westling, 2007: 4). According to Fugslang (2010), repetition and impact are key preconditions for speaking of innovation. In other words, ad hoc adjustments become innovations because they are stabilized and replicated over

⁸ Interview 2.

⁹ Elizabeth Linder, Internet Workshop organized in the European Parliament “Using Facebook as a political representative”, 21 March 2012 (participant observation)

time, such as Facebook's timeline feature.

Emerging practices: innovation in communication techniques

The use of social media by MEPs is a relatively recent phenomenon. There are a number of assumptions about the way they, and politicians in general, use and should use this technology. In 2011, for instance, Vergeer, Hermans and Sams wrote: "Most candidates in 2009 still used Twitter reluctantly" (2011: 477). However the scholars did not ask the candidates whether they really used the technology reluctantly. Similarly, it is not uncommon to read that politicians do not use social media to their full potential (as described above, in the section "politicians as users of social media"). Such a statement indicates that social media should be used in a certain way, i.e. to engage citizens and to promote dialogue by replying and retweeting. If this is not the case, it would therefore mean that users do not act upon the innovative proprieties of the technology: they do not use the technology as they "should", they do not use technology in an innovative manner. Innovation is therefore understood in a specific and normative way which translates into a specific type of injunctive discourse.

Such an approach, however, does not take into consideration the context (the organization, the political sphere, the media sphere, etc.), nor does it take into account the individual and collective actors. Innovation is not necessarily where it is expected. Innovation is not necessarily easily visible, but it occurs nonetheless. As Hartley (2005) points out, innovation is not just a new idea but a new practice. Therefore an innovation perspective should be balanced with a practice perspective in order to understand the developments that take place (Steensen, 2013).

As we have started to see, emerging practices are developing with the use of social media technology. Jouët (1993) believes that practice is a more elaborated-on concept than the one of usage, because it covers not only the use of technology but also individual behaviors, attitudes, and representations that are directly or indirectly related to the technology. In such an approach, practices are seen as an individual and collective process of appropriation and transformation (De Certeau, 1980) of technology and users as active actors who seize the technology devices and "creatively invent unexpected practices" (Mallard, 2005:41)). Haddon describes such creative practices as "daily acts of innovativeness, routine ways in which users manage their technologies" (2005:55). Consequently we need to look for the regular activities and daily practices that politicians and staff develop as regards to social media, as innovation may involve new practices, "doing new things with the technology" (Haddon, 2005: 57). Listening is one of them. Crawford (2009:526) points out that, thanks to social media, politicians develop a "greater capacity to listen to multiple audiences online and more people come to expect this form of attention" but she then concludes that the listening

mode that politicians develop contribute to “little value to online communities” (Crawford, 2009:527). She indeed focuses on the visible part of the activity of listening: she thus speaks of “reciprocal listening” which implies “responding to comments and direct messages” (2009:530). However, listening means paying attention to someone or something in order to hear what is being said. Not responding to all the comments does not mean not listening. Little is actually known about the listening mode that politicians develop. In the statement below, a parliamentary assistant describes how, in the MEP office, the staff and the politician follow the reactions to what they post on social media and may decide the editorial content of their messages accordingly.

If we have a story which has many likes, like we had 2 weeks ago, I suggested my MEP to post an upload (...) and we never had so many likes on that day”¹⁰.

“Whenever I have less than 10 likes when I post a new status for my MEP, I think that maybe I should not have published it, maybe it wasn’t that interesting. Little by little, I think that the “like” becomes an indicator for the quality of the content.”¹¹

Those two quotes illustrate the attention given to reactions to what has been posted, with an editorial perspective. The listening activity is a common practice in the journalistic realm. Indeed, Deuze (1999:376) notes that a professional journalist performs “at least one of the four selected journalistic ‘core’ activities: news gathering/research, selecting, writing/processing, editing”. Listening and news gathering is one of the main functions that social networks have allowed MEPs and their staff to develop, despite the fact that they are not professional journalists:

My MEP also gains information through Twitter, which is quite interesting too. Lots of Austrian journalists use Twitter, and this is quite interesting because you get information very directly and very soon.”¹²

My MEP (...) gets a lot of information she wouldn’t have if she just read newspapers or call people. It’s a way of working. I think she thinks she cannot do her work properly without Facebook and Twitter.”¹³

Social media technology indeed represents for politicians a new instrument for information retrieval and monitoring. Monitoring is thus a feature that is now

¹⁰ Interview 4.

¹¹ Interview 1.

¹² Interview 5.

¹³ Interview 6.

accessible to most politicians and staff, “It is really the best way for me to give all information to my MEP about what is being said on Internet about issues she works on”¹⁴.

MEPs, as many professional politicians who are often unknown to many people, do not necessarily receive a huge number of comments on Twitter or Facebook.

People who follow the events of Members of the European Parliament, except for activists and journalists, there is nobody else.¹⁵

So far the discussions on social media are limited. It’s not that we put something and suddenly there is this big conversation, that’s not happening so far.¹⁶

Others cannot or do not want to systematically reply: “It’s very difficult to keep everyone, there are so many people”¹⁷ explains an interviewee. But social media technology requires a form of constant visible presence that does not fit with the activity of listening, and perhaps does not fit with the nature of political activity itself. Politicians indeed, as well as their staff, cannot spend all their days researching tweets and messages to reply to:

If my MEP starts by interfering after the first one has posted something, then people will look at him as a person who just sits on the computer and waits and does nothing more than that.¹⁸

Therefore they develop a strategy to maintain a presence in social media networks on a daily basis which accommodates their work and their objectives. First, they tell their own story (“The work is done, and then you tell people about it, and you use social media to do it”¹⁹). They are aware that they need to tell a story on a daily basis:

One of the things which is important with social media is that it is updated all the time.²⁰

¹⁴ Interview 1.

¹⁵ Interview 7.

¹⁶ Interview 2.

¹⁷ Interview 8.

¹⁸ Interview 4.

¹⁹ Interview 9.

²⁰ Interview 10.

At least once a day you should make an upload. At least. This is our rule. On Facebook, we try to have one post per day. Besides the statistics as well say that a post per day and there is more interaction and engagement. It is what we want. But sometimes more often, if there are lots of things happening. Same thing for Twitter, normally it is one time per day, but when there is an event, we use live blogging and we publish more.²¹

But they do not have something new or interesting to communicate every single day and more than once the day. So it becomes quite common for MEPs or staff to use their social network pages as a way to spread news that they find engaging or illuminating. To do so, they have to listen to what is written and said on the Twitter sphere - and beyond on the media sphere. Here again, the listening activity is quite central: “We also post articles from newspapers that are related to our work”²² explains the employee of a MEP. They therefore leverage social media technology to foster interest on specific issues. In doing so, they acquire skills that are familiar to journalists. Ornebring (2013:43) refers to filtering skills as “editorial judgment,” i.e. “an ability of journalists to decide on behalf of the audience what is important and what they should know”.

Once again, political users adopt techniques that are usually associated with journalism. This point is made explicit by this assistant:

My MEP posts something, he often does it when he finds an article on Financial Times for example, then he shares it on his account with a headline ‘I agree on this because for such and such.’²³

Such a statement, which reflects a common practice, highlights the dual approach to editorial editing on social media technology: MEPs and their staff both try to set the agenda in emphasizing some specific issues (just as journalists do) but they also use the opportunity to give their views and opinions. Elmer, Langlois and McKelvey (2012) claim that the permanent campaign in new media age is an “immanent space of reaction to political events” as opposed to “the programmable 24 hours news cycle”.

As a particular example, MEPs use newspapers articles as an argument in a demonstration to prove their point. In the example below, the hyperlink brings the reader to an article of the Telegraph.

²¹ Interview 11.

²² Interview 12.

²³ Interview 4.

However, some politicians go further by embedding journalism techniques into political communication:

Sometimes we try to choose pieces of information or news that are sort of buzzing in the sort of blogosphere. You know everyone is discussing parental leave, ok, maybe we try to get in there as well with a tweet or with Facebook.²⁴

Sometimes the constituency office would say “we posted a story on something last week and this has been a lot of comments and interests, maybe we should do a blog, maybe we should do an event”. And then we do pick up issues and then we go after when we see the reception on the social media.²⁵

Indeed, according to the representative of Facebook: “You’re a bit of a newspaper editor in this, you get to do a bit more layout design.”²⁶

The way political actors use social media technology leads them to bring journalism techniques into political communication. For instance, the Facebook page of a candidate for the 2014 European elections in the UK shown below is a good illustration of how some politicians use social media networks: they integrate articles from newspapers and other news organizations with their own articles. To paraphrase Deuze (1999), the online politician is nowadays a professional who is performing journalistic tasks.

Jenkins and Deuze propose the concept of “convergence culture” that Benkler has described as “hybrid media ecology,” within which various types of actors can produce and distribute content (Jenkins & Deuze, 2007:5). Politicians use social media technology to distribute content, as well as to perform journalistic tasks. Political actors, when they are using social media networks, are thus embedded in this changing global media system in which they essentially become

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview 10.

²⁶ Presentation by Elizabeth Linder, Internet Workshop organized in the European Parliament “Using Facebook as a political representative”, 21 March 2012 (participant observation), *op. cit.*

The screenshot displays a social media interface with several posts. At the top, a post titled "European Movement" includes a link to a website and a brief description of the organization. Below this is a poll asking "Should Scotland be an independent country?" with a progress bar showing 61% for "No" and 39% for "Yes". The poll results are displayed as a horizontal bar chart. To the right of the poll, there is a post about "Food poverty" with a link to a BBC documentary. Below the poll, a post from "Paul Brannen" shares a link to a news article about the Bishop of Manchester's views on foodbanks. To the right of this, another post from "Paul Brannen" shares a link to a photo of Action 2014. At the bottom right, there is a post titled "The Joke's on You!" with a green background. The interface includes navigation buttons like "J'aime", "Commenter", and "Partager" for each post.

vote/

European Movement - 1269582272.app.telemw.com

The European Movement international (EMI) is the oldest and largest pro and pan-European civil society network. It has fought for...

J'aime - Commenter - Recevoir les notifications

Paul Brannen a partagé un lien. il y a 19 heures

Good news for Labour and those who stand to benefit from a Labour government at Westminster. While Labour could form a government without any seats from Scotland it would obviously help to have them.

If there was a referendum tomorrow on Scotland's future and this was the question, how would you vote?

Should Scotland be an independent country? (Excluding don't knows and wouldn't votes)

61% No 61 61 60

39% Yes 39 39 40

Scottish voters oppose independence by 60%-40% yougov.co.uk

I bring important news from Scotland. Nothing much is changing. I realise this will disappoint those people, journalists in particular, for whom stability is boring, bereft of news value and therefore to be ignored. In this case, however, I believe the...

J'aime - Commenter - Partager

Food poverty: Panorama, Edwina Currie and the missing ministers www.theguardian.com

The rise of food banks in Britain tells a story of punitive welfare changes, but as a BBC documentary found, the government is curiously reluctant to stand up and defend the reforms

J'aime - Commenter - Partager

Paul Brannen a partagé un lien. il y a 19 heures

Tax evasion: the main cause of global poverty

H ON THE BLOG

Tax Evasion: The Main Cause of Global Poverty www.huffingtonpost.co.uk

Just think, if the money lost to tax evasion was available for governments to allocate according to current spending patterns, the amount going towards health services could save an estimated 1.9 million children a year. That's approximately 21...

J'aime - Commenter - Partager

Paul Brannen a partagé la photo de Action 2014. il y a 20 heures

UKIP need stopping and only you the voter can do that ... by voting against them and for another party.

Nigel doesn't believe in UKIP's ability to make a difference at the European Parliament.

So why vote for them to represent you there?

The Joke's on You!

media themselves.

Another emerging practice that is noticeable cannot be easily seen online. According to Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010), social media is collaborative and is defined by social interaction. But scholars usually focus on the visible part of the iceberg, that is, the interactions that are taking place online. This is the reason why some scholars emphasize that politicians appear as not dialoguing enough on

social media (Crawford, 2009). However they are often complementing dialoguing outside social media platforms. As pointed out before, social media are embedded in other social spaces than the Internet, such as the MEP's office. SNSs require and incentivise collaboration within the team as they are often managed collectively:

We have an open debate and open discussion. Everyday we look at the media headlines, and we talk to our MEP and say « you know this story is good, you could say that this is good also for Denmark because bla bla » So we have like 2 or 3 stories that we discuss everyday, and then choose one of them to be the main article on the Facebook.²⁷

For Facebook, it's someone in our constituency office. Twitter is also run by someone in the constituency office, but the MEP tweets himself as well, so partly my MEP, partly the constituency office.²⁸

We talk about it in the office, sometimes we discuss an update, we usually do that if there is something big, he [the MEP] comes into the office and looks up at the 4 of us and says "I'm thinking of posting this, I'm not quite sure, what do you think?"²⁹

Normally we have a very open environment, we discuss things and then we decide on them. We discuss things with him [the MEP], should we do it... Sometimes he says "I want to tweet about that", and sometimes we say "you should tweet about that". We discuss very informally."³⁰

Just as the editorial content of a newspaper is discussed during a news conference, the editorial line of content published on Twitter and Facebook can be discussed within the team:

Yes, we discuss. She's in the INTA committee and in our delegation she's responsible for ACTA. It was something very tough going on, on social networks. So we were always discussing how is she going to communicate how she's doing to argue, she always wanted to have a feedback from us. But she's writing in her words.³¹

Collective work and writing is not necessarily a new phenomenon within teams of politicians. As recalled by Le Bart, before the rise of social media,

²⁷ Interview 4.

²⁸ Interview 10.

²⁹ Interview 4.

³⁰ Interview 8.

³¹ Interview 5.

“writing is being done by a growing number of professionals and it can be analysed as one way of carrying out the political profession” (1998:1). However, with social media technology, writing seems to become an end in itself. Social network sites contribute to ritualizing the act of writing on a regular basis, like a routine task. Furthermore, social media tend to position backstage actors, such as political auxiliaries and press or communication officers, as frontstage actors, without their identities being necessarily revealed and known to the audience. SNSs tools are often being promoted as transparent and personalized tools while being strategically used among actors who are not necessarily the owners of the accounts. Crawford (2009) talks about “ventriloquism” and criticizes this type of usage: she claims that it is “a pretence of presence or a consultation puppet-show”. However, from an internal communication point of view, these tools illustrate a creative and collaborative way to produce a narrative and identity presentations in a professional context.

New technology, old habits: going beyond the discourse of innovation

Innovation discourse has put the emphasis on newness (Steensen, 2013). When it comes to the use of social media technology in politics, such a discourse tends to present social media as being innovative tools for democracy rather than being innovative tools for organization and work processes, as highlighted previously. For example, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) argue that SNSs serve as an arena of political discussion and allow political actors to interact with citizens. More recently, Larsson (2013b: 1) summarizes this discourse this way: “Since the mid 1990s, the Internet has often been pointed to as having the potential for reinvigorating democratic processes. (...) Similar rhetoric is now commonly heard in conjunction with the rise of the so-called social media like Twitter or Facebook.”

Thus innovation discourse sheds light on what is regarded as meaningful and desirable innovation. Flichy (2007) highlights the role of such discourses in the conception and diffusion of the technology. The accompanying discourses, i.e. a set of messages that are characterized by their place of expression in the public sphere and that are formed by external commentaries about a technology, its uses, its context, and the consequence of its usage (Breton, 2002), play a decisive role in that matter. They are part of the technology itself. As for social media technology, Loader and Mercea (2011:759) claim that “much of the hyperbolic rhetoric heralding the catalytic prophesies of social media arises from its marketing origins”. Pempek, Yermolaleva and Calvert (2009) remind us that “online sites are often considered innovative and different from traditional media such as television, film, and radio because they allow direct interaction with others” (229). In other words, SNSs are expected to be innovative by nature. In such a context, politicians try to recreate a positive image in which they have a

central place: new media technology is presented as a tool to interact directly with citizens and to provide them with a space of discussion, as illustrated below with the extract from a discourse by the President of the European Parliament: “With Facebook, Twitter and other 2.0 tools, we can get closer to our citizens, on a daily and almost personal basis”³².

However, the thematic of innovation is often a strategic rhetoric (Ramiller, 2006) that is essential to building up political leadership. Gourgues (2012) points out that the politician needs to present himself as an innovator: SNSs are thus presented as innovative tools for political communication and their users as innovators. But it is important not to jump to conclusions concerning the actual innovative aspect of these technologies.

Social media technology does not indeed call into question traditional tools, such as the press release, the face-to-face meeting, etc. The use of SNSs does not mean that other tools are no longer used; rather, new norms are being put into place — especially regarding the diffusion and circulation of messages within the media system. For instance, using Twitter as a PR tool does not mean that politicians abandon the press release, rather that Twitter is another channel to distribute the press release. “I use Twitter to distribute press releases”³³ explains an interviewee.

In the example below, the MEP uses the title of a press release as message on Twitter and adds a hyperlink where the press release is published.

Social media are thus integrated into a broader communication apparatus, and their specific objective is to spread information or political messages to a larger and more targeted audience. One interviewee makes this especially clear: “Everything he [the MEP] writes on the blog is on Facebook and then on Twitter. And then we upload other things, articles he writes in the newspaper, press releases or just things like “ok, in the committee this week, this and this””³⁴.

³² <http://arc.eppgroup.eu/Press/pdoc10/101201intervention-buzek.pdf>

³³ Interview 1.

³⁴ Interview 8.

Therefore SNSs continue traditional characteristics of political and media communication. Sinescu (2008) highlights the media influence on political practice, especially in regard to “the fragmentation of political messages”. She looks at the role and place of television, but SNSs seem in a way to continue and to emphasize this characteristic of the traditional media system:

It is a presentation of facts and stakes under the shape of an “information-capsule”; in the capacity of fragmenting the problems in adopting the clip type effect, (...); to accept the reduction of the speech time even to a couple of phrases or small formulae, and to be capable of producing speeches that summarize thoughts in 30 seconds or 2 minutes (...). This way, we can say that the rhetoric of politics became the art of small sentences (Sinescu, 2008:89).

From 30 seconds to 140 characters, it would be wrong to believe in the complete newness of SNSs. The editorial constraints for politicians on SNSs are not very far from those on traditional media, such as television, newspapers, and radio. In all technologies, the journalistic frame is a strong reference for writing. Politicians and staff expect journalists to be looking for short messages. Twitter is therefore a very useful channel: “It is eventually much easier to alert people on a specific topic with 140 characters. (...) It’s short, but the journalist will be interested in a key word, a hashtag, and you must be clever enough to know to use the hashtag”³⁵.

In addition, political actors are aware of how the media system works. Social media technology is therefore integrated into a more traditional global media system and generates new routines and innovative usages in political communication that are built upon interactions between “old” and “new” media. This integration is made clear by several interviewees:

If we want to appear in the media, to comment something, we publish a little Tweet, and straightaway I receive calls from journalists. Could my MEP comment this and that?³⁶

You can just throw something over the fence and you see if they [the journalists] pick it up or if they don’t. Sometimes you see tweets in the newspapers, it’s also very nice. And also sometimes I get phone calls from journalists: “oh, I read on Twitter this, this and this, can you tell a bit more about it?”. So yes, it’s really changing the way we work with journalists.³⁷

³⁵ Interview 1.

³⁶ Interview 11.

³⁷ Interview 6.

Journalists will contact us when they see a tweet on something and say ‘would you like to be interviewed for the TV on this?’ because we see you’re interested.³⁸

Long before social network sites were introduced, Goffman (1959) underlined how individuals seek to manage what impression they give to others. In the political realm as well, actors seek to control the impression they give, they try to “shape perceptions via the media”, and “Internet may have significant potential” (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:89). Social media technology provides them with another route to present themselves in an innovative way. Impression management is remediated through social media technology. This assistant explains that the use of social media for his MEP is also important “(...) for his image, so that he can appear as someone who follows technological changes, who knows what to do with them. It is very good for the image in general”³⁹. It comes back to what has been said before: politicians are aware that they are expected to be using social media technology, to demonstrate that “they are open to debate”⁴⁰. So the same interviewee notes: “You want people to interact with our MEP and to show them that he’s active, also virtually”⁴¹.

Marwick and boyd (2010:127) talk about “micro-celebrity practices” that they define as “creating an affable brand and sharing personal information”. Furthermore, social media make it possible to communicate to audiences without depending on journalists. Regarding impression management, this is of particular relevance. Hoff (2004:13) observes that even though the Internet does not replace traditional media, it is seen as a “necessary and useful way of circumventing the conventional media”. However (offline and online) journalists are still one of the main target audiences of political actors, both online and offline. A form of permanence of communication exists around social media technology, while they also expand the media system in which constraints and characteristics of traditional and new media are often blurred and intertwined. Social media technology inflects old practices in new ways in which users play a decisive role. If we believe that users drive innovation, the organization in which they are situated and more broadly the social system they are involved in have an impact on the process. Indeed, innovation is a process where “organizational structures and individual action interact” (Steensen, 2009: 821).

In other words, technology is not innovative by nature (i.e. the Web 2.0 is not participative in nature). It is the way it is used in a specific context that will bring

³⁸ Interview 10.

³⁹ Interview 11.

⁴⁰ Interview 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

innovation to technology. But context has an impact, “both directly on innovation determinants, processes and outcomes and indirectly through organization features” (Hartley, 2005:33). As reminded by Orlikowski (2000: 410), agents act in relation to « the institutional contexts in which they live and work, and the social and cultural conventions associated with participating in such contexts ». More research needs to be conducted on the parliamentary institutions and their impact on political communication and the use of social network sites. Bonny and Giuliani (2012) argue that innovation can often contradict the institution because innovation puts into question organization processes and existing routines. Alter (2000) observes a form of confrontation between innovation and organization: organizations crystallize social configurations that go against innovation. In the realm of politics, this can be especially true as innovation would expect governance to be performed through different forms. In other words, for an innovation to develop, it needs a transformation of both the institutions as well as the role that politicians play in them. It is not to say that only politicians play a role in institutions: public administrators have also a central role as well as other public and private actors (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). However, members of Parliament are elected and therefore expectations are not the same, especially with regard to communication and engaging citizens. Sørensen (2006:107) notes that “to change practice requires modification to the role perceptions of those who inhabit the political system, not least the politicians themselves”. For Klijn and Koppenjan (2000), the roles politicians play are institutionally fixed and related to prevailing views about democracy. There is an inevitable tension between the individual actors and the well-established ways of doing things in institutions, as reminded by Deuze (2006). This aspect is however usually not taken into account while it has a tremendous impact on emergence of innovation. Communication reflects organizations and the political system itself, it is therefore important to take into account the nature of organizations and the system as well as the role expected from its actors because users drive innovation but are nevertheless restricted by organizational and systemic constraints that are not so much related to technology but rather to the use of technology. Coming back to Vergeer et al.’s use of the word of “reluctance” which seems to encompass a number of academic approaches to the analysis of the way politicians use social media (2011), I would argue that SNSs have triggered transformation of working processes in order to adapt to a more technological environment. However, politicians are also restricted not so much by the technical constraints of the apparatus (i.e. SNSs), but rather by the editorial constraints of the media system (both traditional and new media) as well as the political system and the institutions as a whole. In the case of the European Parliament, as pointed out by Busby and Belkacem (2013), the Lisbon Treaty has further empowered the institution and expanded its competences into new legislative areas, which has increased the workload of its members. The high volume as well as the highly technical nature of the information does not easily

translate into publishable messages on social network sites, nor facilitate the dialogue with the man in the street, as highlighted by this conversation on Twitter between a MEP and a follower:

The conversation is limited to a narrow audience that knows about very technical and complex regulations. In other words, the communication online is constrained by the context offline: if they want to discuss issues at stake, MEPs are faced with the difficulty of rendering “communicable” legislative pieces of work which are not necessarily easily transmittable through social media.

The tweet below comes from the same MEP and is about a series of negotiations between the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Parliament on various legislative texts. However the use of abbreviations and institutional insider references (such as *trialogue*) tends, once again, to reach a limited type of audience. In such type of very sensitive negotiations, live blogging is very uncommon (just like journalists usually do not

reveal off-the-record comments). Once again, the offline context has a direct impact on the online content.

Conclusion

According to Fuglsang (2010:67), innovation is made up of two activities: first doing something new, and then developing it in a given context. In both activities, the user is the driver of innovation. This paper's objective is therefore to focus on the recursive intertwining of users and technology in practice because media fall within the process of innovation both in usages and practices. It sought to understand how, why and with what consequences politicians use social media technology in order to identify innovation both at the level of the usage and the level of technology. Throughout this paper I have used one specific field to exemplify my arguments – my research related to the use of social media by Members of the European Parliament. I have argued that communication changes emerge from the performativity of social media as interacting with actors' practices. The performativity is sociomaterial, shaped by the way in which the technology is designed, configured but also engaged in practice (Hardy, 2010). Innovation both emerges from and is embedded in practices, which justifies the focus on micro-sociological relations. For this purpose ethnography methods were mobilized, especially as uses of social media technology are interwoven with the qualities of the apparatus but also with the roles and objectives of the actors as well as with the political structures. Therefore we must examine carefully the experiences politicians make in specific environments and understand how practices are shaped. Politicians work with social media technology in a way that might be unexpected or difficult to anticipate. Instead of using social media to engage in debate with the proverbial man in the street – Members of the European Parliament seem to connect with a specific set of audiences (journalists, members of the party, activists, experts)⁴² – they use social network sites to retrieve, editorialize and distribute content, just as professional journalists do. Innovation is thus situated at the level of practices and working processes. According to Loader and Mercea (2011: 761), the plasticity of social media provides the possibility for innovative modes of political communication. Indeed, social media technology creates new conventions and practices of communication, in particular between the politician and the journalist, that had

⁴² Loader and Mercea emphasize that most active political users of social media platforms are “social movements activists, politicians, party workers and those who are already fully committed to political causes” (2011:767).

not been observed previously. In this respect, social media technology is at the forefront of a rapid transformation of political newsmaking (Small, 2011). Ultimately politicians have an innovative use of social network sites insofar as old and new practices coexist. Practices that we used to regard as belonging to traditional political communication (such as press releases) still exist alongside new practices (such as editorializing contents). The development of new online practices is indeed significantly influenced by previously established offline practices but also by the offline setting.

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