

How deeply are parliaments engaging on social media?

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Abstract:

This article explores how parliaments are using social media, assessing the role this plays in public engagement. Relatively latecomers to the world of social media, parliaments have made considerable strides in the last couple of years with many now joining a platform that is still perceived as an unknown and vulnerable space for formal political institutions. We show that parliaments are using social media mainly to report parliamentary business, interacting with citizens only on the margins. We consider the extent to which this approach constitutes public engagement and explore the differences in strategy between parliamentary institutions. In our analysis we consider in particular the specificity of parliamentary institutions in their ability to use this type of tools effectively. We also reflect on the limitations and challenges these tools raise to an institution such as a parliament, namely in terms of engaging with the public. Our study includes an overview of social media accounts in parliaments across the world, being mainly based on a content analysis of a sample of Facebook and Twitter feeds from five European parliaments, supported by information drawn from elite interviews with senior parliamentary officials and representatives.

Keywords: parliament; social media; public engagement.

1. Introduction

Parliaments have become the face of political disengagement, often portrayed as closed, old fashioned, and inaccessible institutions. Yet, parliaments have never been this active in developing strategies to promote public engagement (Hansard Society, 2011b; IPU, 2012), from educational programmes to social media accounts. The initiatives are many, even if often slow coming. We still know little though about what these initiatives entail and, in particular, whether they add much to the more traditional forms of engagement that have been in place for some time. Social media would seem to have considerable potential to develop parliaments' ability to promote more substantive engagement with the institution. In this article we explore the extent to which parliaments' use of social media does equate to substantive forms of public engagement. Our analysis is mainly focused on five European parliaments (European, French, Portuguese, Scottish and UK) with a content analysis of their Facebook and Twitter activity, complemented by elite interviews. We start the article with a discussion of the type of parliamentary public engagement social media may be able to foster. Next we establish the challenges that parliaments face in utilising social media effectively, as well as highlighting its potential. After this we move on to analyse the extent to which today's parliaments are utilising social media, with an overview of parliamentary accounts across the world. We then move on to analyse the adoption of new media by our sampled institutions, identifying specific differences between types of chambers. We finish with an analysis of the contents of the social media messages, showing that parliaments are using this tool mainly to report parliamentary business though with some evidence of more substantive engagement also emerging.

2. Parliamentary public engagement and social media

Recent contributions have explored some of the current forms of public engagement being offered by parliaments, such as petitions, parliamentary websites and outreach activities (Kelso, 2007; Fox, 2009; Carman, 2009 and 2010; Clark and Wilford, 2012; Hansard Society, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Walker, 2012). Here, we focus that analysis on social media tools, namely Facebook and Twitter parliamentary accounts. Specifically, we aim to understand the extent to which parliamentary social media corresponds to actions of public engagement. Building on evaluations of parliamentary public engagement, we identify the purposes for which parliaments are utilising social media on the basis of a sample of Facebook and Twitter feeds of five parliaments over a period of four months.

Research on parliamentary use of new media have tended to focus mainly on representatives (for example: Hoff, 2004; Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2006; Norton, 2007, Jackson, 2008, Vicente-Merino, 2007, Leston-Bandeira, 2012a), rather than the actual

institution (with exceptions: Norris, 2001; Setälä, and Grönlund, 2006; De Rosa, 2009; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira 2013, Joshi and Rosenfield, 2013), and few have explored yet the use of actual Web 2.0, particularly at the institutional level. The first of these studies focused essentially on the level of information provided, moving then to the levels of interactivity enabled. Here we take this a step further and assess the content of that activity in terms of its engagement message. Where does parliamentary social media fit in terms of the ladders of public engagement?

The term of public engagement is used daily to indicate different ideas. It refers to various notions of engagement, which ultimately may result in participation; it is not necessarily though about actual participation. It is a journey along a path from receipt of information to actual participation; it can therefore assume both active and passive forms. Arnstein's 1969 "ladder of citizen participation" (p.217) sets extreme points at either end, encompassing the whole span of this journey from manipulation of citizens by public authorities to the actual citizen control of policy deliberations. Carman starts at the information level, stratifying legislatures' public engagement systems into four categories, where at the lowest level these would simply provide information to citizens, to its highest level where the public would be integrated in the process of legitimising policy-making (2009: 37). Leston-Bandeira develops the idea of information provision, by establishing a fivefold framework where besides the passive receipt of information, there are also two other more active processes which imply, on one hand, understanding of that information and, on the other, identification of its relevance to the citizen's own day-to-day (2012b). This differentiates diverse implications in the act of information provision. As parliaments are mainly still at the lowest level of engagement – information provision – it is useful to identify different types of information provision and different consequences. Curtin and Meijer give us a useful distinction here between "thin" and "thick" transparency (2006: 113-115); where thick transparency equates to more substantive and effective access to information; i.e. the institution not only provides information, but also guides the public in their receipt and understanding of this information, empowering the public to utilise that content.

Social media cannot meet all steps of the public engagement process, but it does embody some of its key components. A key distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 media is the ability to go beyond provision of information. Applying this to parliaments, social media would seem to provide an opportunity to nurture the provision of information into actual understanding, perhaps identification, and ultimately participation in the system. It could help to move towards more substantive public engagement. Our content analysis of social media explores the different types of contents transmitted by parliaments, identifying the instances where it may go beyond a mere

formalistic approach of issuing information, towards an approach that enables more substantive engagement.

3. Do social media fit parliaments?

The rise of the Internet has raised the visibility of parliaments considerably (Leston-Bandeira, 2007: 656). Once geographically distant and removed institutions, parliaments have, over the last two decades, acquired a visibility that spans physical barriers. Although many claim that parliaments are still not as transparent as they should be, in particular in the way parliamentary data is made available,¹ the reality is that at a few clicks distance any citizen can today access information that would have been accessible to only a very few people just two decades ago. This development has taken place mainly through parliamentary websites, with the occasional added platform. Whilst parliaments have become more proficient in utilising websites to disseminate their work and, in some cases, develop engagement with citizens through a variety of tools (forums, games, videos), the adoption of social media has been somewhat more timid.

There are a number of reasons why the adoption of social media by parliaments has been slow. One and foremost is the fact that parliamentary institutions are generally slow in adapting to new technology, due partly to its collective character of decision-making. When new technologies emerge, there is traditionally a time lag before parliamentary institutions adopt these effectively. Besides this, social media embody a style of communication that does not easily marry institutional communication. Social media imply an individual voice that parliament does not have. Parliament is constituted by a collective of many actors and it is not the politician who speaks for parliament, it is the parliamentary official, who needs to be at all points non-biased. As the Hansard Society put it, “we note that agreeing an ‘institutional voice’ for social media channels is an issue for Parliament” (2011: 55). The value of social media, however, lies in its ability to facilitate connections through quick, spontaneous, and informal reactions; social media imply a persona behind its input. Social media has also brought something new to parliaments: the degree of visibility of its relationship with citizens. Through social media, comments and reactions to parliament become much more public. Criticism and hate mail towards parliaments have always existed, but social media make these much more patent and easy to be expressed. The use of social media raises therefore a number of challenges to parliaments and, to a large extent, requires these institutions to engage in a new style of communication beyond the traditional institutional one.

¹ See the Open Data movement and in particular the OpeningParliament.org’s *Declaration on Parliamentary Openness* (<http://www.openingparliament.org/declaration>, accessed 8/2/2013).

However, social media also offer new and valuable possibilities for engagement with the public. As an institution often put at the centre of the political disengagement discourse (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006, Hay 2007; Norris, 2011), social media offer parliaments many new possibilities of engagement: a direct access to citizens not mediated by the media or parties, more direct access to a younger public, the possibility to react more quickly to news and events, the possibility to engage the public into a conversation and the possibility to target more specific issues. More importantly, social media offers considerable potential in terms of actual political participation. It cannot therefore be ignored by parliamentary institutions. This explains why, despite the challenges raised and strong resistance, the parliamentary community has recently pushed the adoption of social media as a public engagement tool by legislatures. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) adopted by unanimous vote, at its 128th Assembly in March 2013, a resolution on the use of social media, specifically focused on enhancing citizen engagement (IPU, 2013), having also issued then a set of detailed guidelines to support parliaments in their adoption and application of social media (Williamson, 2013).² Likewise, the Global Centre for ICT's biannual World e-Parliament Conference of September 2012 also had a very strong emphasis on social media and communication with citizens with two whole panels dedicated to this (Global Centre for ICT, 2012a). Slowly, parliaments have started to adopt social media over the last couple of years;³ as this use expands and becomes more complex, questions emerge about its effectiveness, namely in terms of engagement with the public. Is the specific communicative value of social media being used by parliaments to promote citizen participation or has it become just another channel to disseminate information?

Social media could specifically provide for a privileged channel for pro-system citizen participation. As Heath shows, it is important to distinguish between different forms of participation in politics as they link to different types of citizen motivations (2004); from our point of view it is important to identify in particular how these institutions utilise this means for public engagement. Whilst research has explored many of the reasons leading citizens to participate (Olsen, 1965; Whiteley, Seyd, Richardson and Bissell, 1994; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Bowler, Donovan and Karp, 2007; Norris, 2011), we still know little about how actual institutions, such as parliament, engage with this process. As Cain et al have shown, forms of participatory democracy have expanded considerably (2003), becoming increasingly integrated into

² About a month later, another guide on social media and specifically aiming parliamentary staff was issued at: C. Leston-Bandeira and D. Bender, 2013, *How Parliaments Use Social Media – a guide for parliaments*, University of Hull (available at www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/PDF/How%20Parliaments%20Use%20Social%20Media%20-%20Guide.pdf - accessed 11/07/2013).

³ The following lists all Facebook and Twitter institutional accounts for parliaments across the world: www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/PDF/Worldwide%20Parliaments%20on%20Social%20Media_updated.pdf (accessed 11/07/2013)

our representative political systems. Indeed, in the specific case of parliaments, the last decade has witnessed an expansion of a wide range of forms of public engagement (Hansard Society, 2011b; IPU, 2012; Leston-Bandeira, 2013), though many stopping short of actual participation. From the expansion of petition systems (Hough, 2013) to the integration of deliberative methods into the consideration of legislation, such as the Brazilian example of *e-Democracia* (Ferri, 2013). We still know little though about how these varied participatory channels have been used by representative institutions. Here we propose to understand how a key representative institution, parliament, is utilising social media to communicate with the public and the extent to which this can be equated to more substantive forms of public engagement. We focus therefore on the supply side, in terms of how the institution utilises this tool.

4. Methodology

Our research consists of content analysis of the institutional feeds of Facebook and Twitter of seven European parliamentary chambers. It is part of a wider qualitative in-depth study on how parliaments develop policies to engage with the public, which focuses on five European parliaments: European, French, Portuguese, Scottish and UK. These parliaments were selected according to the most different method to combine a number of different institutional characteristics, namely in terms of democratic age, level of governance, electoral system and size of the institution. It is from these five parliaments that we have selected a sample of social media feeds for content analysis. As two of the parliaments within our sample are bicameral, with clear differences in the way the chambers utilise social media, we focus our analysis at the chamber level and therefore our research relates to the use of social media by seven parliamentary chambers: European Parliament, French National Assembly, French Senate, Portuguese Assembly of the Republic, Scottish Parliament, UK House of Commons and UK House of Lords.

Our sample encompasses a period of four months of social media activity, from the 01/11/2011 to the 29/02/2012. This period was chosen as a time of relatively similar levels of activity across the chambers. The social media analysed are these chambers' main institutional accounts in Facebook and Twitter.⁴ As we shall see below, in the case of the UK the division between lower and upper house activity in social media is not always clear-cut, as the houses share some of these services; we will take this into account in our analysis. And the Portuguese parliament does

⁴ The chambers within our sample have multiple accounts, but our content analysis only focuses on the main institutional ones, as follows: Europe (Fb: [/europeanparliament](#); Tw: @Europarl_EN); French lower chamber (Fb: [/AssembléeNationale](#); Tw: @AssembléeNat); French upper chamber (Fb: [/senat.fr](#); Tw: @Senat_Info); Portugal (n.a.); Scotland (Fb: [/scottishparliament](#); Tw: @ScotParl); UK lower chamber (Fb: [/ukparliament](#); Tw: @UKParliament); UK upper chamber (Fb: [/UKHouseofLords](#); Tw: @UKHouseofLords).

not have yet a Facebook or Twitter account; whilst there is no social media content to analyse, we include this case study nonetheless to explore some of the reasons explaining this lack of activity. As explained above, the research at the basis of this article is part of a wider study, which encompasses 58 in-depth interviews with parliamentary officials and representatives with responsibility roles for these parliaments' public engagement services. Our content analysis of social media activity will also draw from these interviews.

Our sample totals 3007 postings⁵ (497 from Facebook and 2510 from Twitter), which we coded essentially to identify different types of engagement content. We identify the type of activity the posting refers to and whether it elicits a specific reaction. The coding distinguished different levels of engagement, from more formalistic to more substantive, identifying also whether it related to activities taking place merely online (or whether they related to offline events), and the actors the posting referred to. As one of the main difficulties for parliaments is the use of a voice and to keep an unbiased approach, we identified instances when the posting referred to specific representatives and/or parties. We also coded specifically for neutrality.⁶ Besides the content analysis of the above social media feeds, we have also collated contextual data to provide an overview of the current usage of Facebook and Twitter by parliaments across the globe, with particular focus on those institutions in Europe.

5. Are parliaments utilising social media?

Before we narrow our analysis to the seven chambers in our sample, it is useful to establish the extent to which parliaments have globally adhered to social media. Comparatively with other political institutions, parliaments have been notably slow in joining social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter. As explained above, many reasons explain this, namely the difficulty in identifying a voice for parliament. Social media are not designed to disseminate information, they have developed to support conversations; as such they may be intuitively useful for a parliamentarian (a politician) to develop a discussion with their represented, but less so for a non-partisan collective such as a legislative institution. Still since the end of the 2000s' first decade, parliaments have started to open Facebook and Twitter accounts as extra channels of communication with the public. The most recent World e-Parliament Report indicated an increase from 13% in 2009 to 31% in 2012 (Global Centre for ICT, 2012b: 30), on the basis of a questionnaire sent to parliaments across the world; this figure is based on replies from parliaments to a survey

⁵ A 'posting' refers to either a tweet on Twitter or a post on Facebook. A 'feed' refers to a collection of postings (news feed on Facebook; a stream on Twitter).

⁶ Though we will not analyse this specific dimension here.

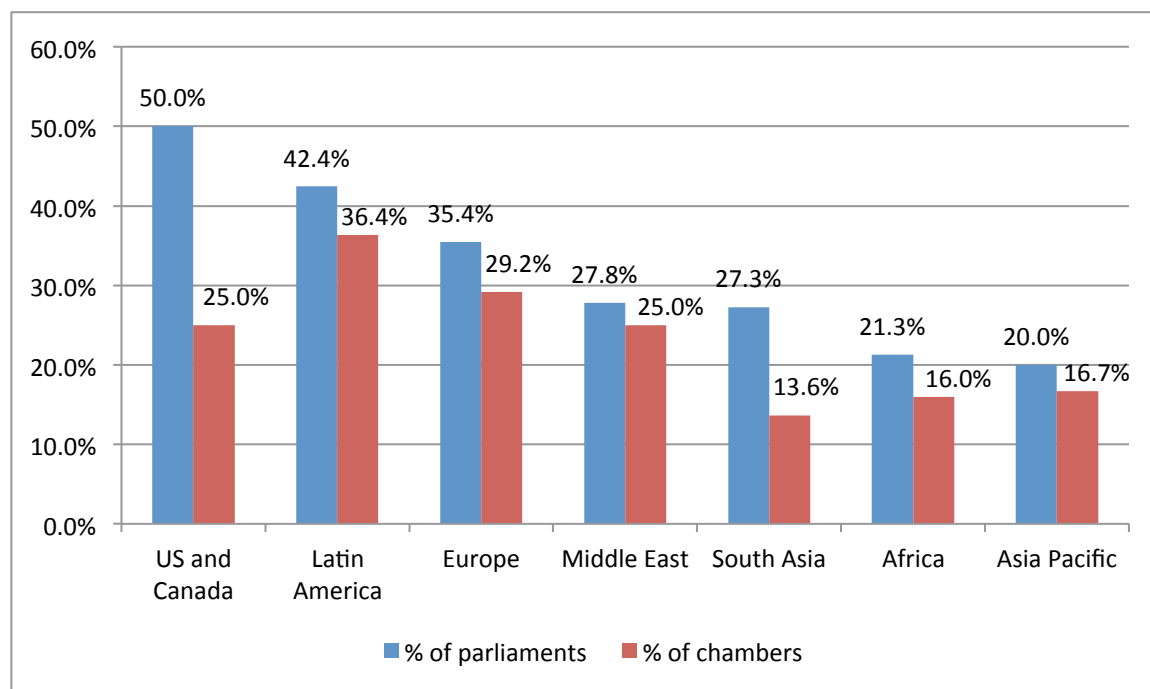
and, consequently, it is indicative and likely to overestimate this figure. Joshi and Rosenfield's coding of 184 parliamentary websites of unicameral parliaments and lower chambers indicates that in 2011 21% had a link to a social media accounts (2013: 15). Our own research indicates an increase of this value in 2013, with 29% of national legislatures across the world having a Facebook and/or a Twitter institutional account.⁷

Figure 1 displays the proportion of parliaments across the world with a Facebook and/or Twitter account.⁸ We distinguish between parliaments and chambers, as our content analysis below identifies some differences between lower and upper chambers' use of social media. Besides, bicameral institutions often have totally separate units dealing with communication for either chamber, with different aims and methods. Figure 1 confirms previous findings showing that parliaments in Latin America are particularly pro-active in the use of social media (Arnold, 2013; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira, 2013: 243-4; Joshi and Rosenfield, 2013: 15) with 42% now having an active institutional account. Comparatively, Europe is therefore lagging behind with only 35% hosting a Facebook and/or Twitter institutional account. Still, these values show an increase in relation to 2011 when Joshi and Rosenfield report on only 27% of the European parliaments having a social media account (Joshi and Rosenfield, 2013: 15). Considering that our data only refers to Facebook and Twitter, it shows a definite increase in the space of two years.

⁷ Please note that whilst our data refers only to Facebook and Twitter institutional accounts, Joshi and Rosenfield's data include other social media (2013), plus cases not limited to an "institutional" account as such.

⁸ All parliamentary Facebook and Twitter accounts were verified by the respective parliamentary website, Twitter, or respective parliamentary officials. This refers to active institutional accounts, representing the whole of the institution, not accounts for say specific committees or events. Data collected in June-July 2013.

Figure 1 – Proportion of Parliaments (and Chambers) with a Facebook and/or Twitter institutional account in 2013



Focusing in on Europe, the UK Parliament was the first legislature to open both a Facebook and a Twitter institutional account, in July 2008. The year after, two more parliaments would follow with Facebook: the European Parliament (April 2009) and the Irish Oireachtas (September 2009). The Norwegian Storting was the next European parliament to open an institutional Twitter account, in March 2009.⁹ It is, however, mainly from 2011 onwards that parliaments in Europe have started to use Facebook and/or Twitter. Parliaments' own experience in using these tools is therefore still very recent; not only do they have little past experience to refer to, but also the sharing of practices across parliaments is still limited. And despite some very active accounts, most of these accounts have very low numbers of users.¹⁰ Table 1 gives a breakdown of the number of users as a ratio in relation to the polity's total population (per 100.000 capita).¹¹

⁹ It is not always possible to verify joining dates on Twitter, in which cases we have sought confirmation from parliamentary officials from the respective parliaments. Email correspondence with officials in the European Parliament place their Twitter joining date at "the beginning of 2009", likely at the same time as Facebook (Parliamentary official, (2013, 20 August), Email message to author).

¹⁰ By users we mean "likes" (Facebook) and "followers" (Twitter).

¹¹ Population values taken from (Eurostat, 2013c).

Table 1: Number of parliaments in Europe utilising Facebook and/or Twitter according to ratio of users by population, per 100.000 capita

	Facebook		Twitter	
<i>Users per 100.000</i>	<i>Number of Parliaments</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number of Parliaments</i>	<i>%</i>
More than 100	1	2%	7	28%
100 - 10	12	28%	14	56%
Less than 10	30	70%	4	16%
<i>totals</i>	43	100%	25	100%

Note: Users data refers to 1 March 2013.

Reflecting its longer presence in Twitter, the Norwegian Storting has the Twitter account with the highest number of followers, in relation to its population size (358.3 per 100.000 people). The European Parliament on the other hand has the highest number of Facebook likes per population size, with 131.3 per every 100.000. But as Table 1 shows most parliaments still have very low levels of users of their social media account, particularly in the case of Facebook. And of course the number of “likes” or “followers” is a relative measure to show awareness, perhaps some interest from citizens, but it shows little more than that; plus interest may not mean positive predisposition and it does not equate to engagement. It is however a measure of possible potential to be exposed to a parliamentary public engagement activity. There is also the potential amplifier effect through specialised followers such as journalists.

Focusing now on our sample of seven chambers, the above overview shows already that the European Parliament (EP) stands out as not only one of the first ones to join Facebook, but also in its relatively high rate of users. The EP is indeed known for its very active social media strategy and practice, particularly in the context of legislative institutions (Leston-Bandeira, 2012b);¹² this is particularly notable in its usage of Facebook. Table 2, which provides an overview of these chambers’ social media profile, confirms this. However, some of the other chambers in our sample also show high levels of activity.

¹² See also its very active participation in practitioners’ conferences such as the World e-Parliament Conferences or the ECPRD (European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation) Parliament on the Net seminars.

Table 2: Overall profile of Facebook and Twitter institutional accounts of our sample chambers

	Facebook			Twitter		
	<i>Date joined</i> *	<i>Total number of users</i> **	<i>Ratio of users per 100.000</i> **	<i>Date joined</i> *	<i>Total number of users</i> **	<i>Ratio of users per 100.000</i> **
European Parliament	April 2009	661,158	131.26	April 2009	18,059	3.58
French National Assembly	February 2011	7,535	11.53	December 2011	12,400	18.98
French Senate	August 2010	12,471	19.08	August 2010	67,182	102.83
Portuguese Assembly of the Republic	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Scottish Parliament	July 2011	769	14.72	April 2011	11,779	225.50
UK Houses of Parliament	July 2008	14,385	22.83	July 2008	123,806	196.55
UK House of Lords	March 2012	201	0.31	September 2011	13,739	21.81

Sources: Respective Facebook and Twitter pages and/or information given directly by parliamentary officials from the respective parliaments over email correspondence (June to August 2013).

Notes: * Date joined refers to when contents starts to be posted.

** User data refers to 1 March 2013.

Table 2 shows that the EP stands out in its usage of Facebook, with a considerably higher number of users, being also an early adopter. This seems the opposite when it comes to Twitter, having the lowest ratio of followers. It is worth pointing out though that the EP has 18 other institutional Twitter accounts, each in a different language. This may partly explain the much lower level of users for Twitter. The Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament, on the contrary have a high number of followers on Twitter, with a clear contrast with Facebook especially in the case of Holyrood. The House of Lords' accounts are comparatively much smaller; however this is not a truthful picture. Despite having a bicameral structure for most of its administrative services, the UK Parliament also has joint services and this includes the web and intranet service.¹³ The Houses of Parliament's accounts cover therefore both chambers. The House of Lords' specific accounts have been developed as an add-on, just as other parliamentary services, divisions and events have created their own social media accounts.¹⁴ There is, however, no equivalent account for the lower

¹³ Interviews in the Houses of Parliament, November 2010 – January 2013.

¹⁴ Amongst other, by June 2013 at least all of the following accounts were also in existence, besides the overall institutional ones: @HouseofCommons, @CommonsHansard, @UKParlArchives, @CommonsBBCom; @CommonsSTC; @CommonsEd; @CommonsEFRA; @CommonsHomeAffs; @CommonsIDC;

chamber.¹⁵ So whilst we identify separately the UK upper chamber's social media, it should be noted that in effect there is no overall account specifically focused on the lower chamber and that the upper chamber has, in practice, two overlapping institutional accounts.

The French case is very different. These are totally separate chambers, each with its own autonomy, services and strategy.¹⁶ And whilst the French Senate hired an external company to manage some of its communications, the National Assembly does everything in house and took a little longer to develop the capacity to adopt social media. This is reflected in the joining dates and the number of social media users, with the Senate having adopted social media much earlier and also having a much higher number of followers, particularly on Twitter. This is particularly interesting considering this upper chamber's "relatively few constitutional and legal powers" (Elgie, 2003: 157) and its well-known conservatism and resistance to change (Knapp and Wright, 2006: 155-157). The French Senate does stand out though in terms of its social media activity, having also other innovative accounts such as the @Senat_Direct, which reports live on debates taking place.

With regards to the Portuguese parliament, this institution does not have a social media presence yet. This is not to say that it has not experimented with social media. It created in 2011, for example, an events Facebook page to support a specific public engagement activity,¹⁷ its Parliament TV Channel has an active Facebook page,¹⁸ one of its committees had a (timid) Twitter presence in the Eleventh Parliament (2009-2011)¹⁹ and a few Portuguese Deputies have been on Facebook and/or Twitter for some time, as have some of its parliamentary groups. It is also worth noting that this parliament has had its own MPs blog system since 2004,²⁰ an innovative initiative in a parliamentary context, especially at a time when most parliaments' internet presence consisted only of a website. Although our interviews show that this institution is aware of the need to adopt social media to reinforce communication with the public,²¹ it is also very cautious. As one of our interviewees said, "to be in the social media, we need to do it well; if it is to not do it well, we might

@UKParlOutreach; @UKParlEducation; @Parliament_Week; @HistParl; @TheVictCommons; @visitparliament; @CommonsLibrary.

¹⁵ Although there is a @HouseofCommons Twitter account, this is specifically focused on reporting business taking place in the Chamber of the House of Commons. It is not a general account on parliamentary business.

¹⁶ Interviews October 2011 – May 2013.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/events/150494285041326/> - accessed 16 July 2013.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/events/150494285041326/> - accessed 16 July 2013. To note that the Parliament TV Channel has its own structure and management team, which is separate from the actual Portuguese parliament.

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/com_economia - accessed 16 July 2013.

²⁰ <http://blogs.parlamento.pt/indice/> - accessed 18 July 2013. The blog is for individual MPs' use. Despite an important innovation at the time, MPs' participation in the blog has always been low and seems inactive since March 2012.

²¹ Interviews January 2012 – May 2013.

as well not be there.”²² The key issue being one of human resources: with a team of four members of staff to support *all* web based development and management, it is problematical to dedicate extra resources to take care of an extra channel of communication, social media.²³ Besides issues of parliamentary resources, we should also consider the demand side. Portugal’s internet penetration is considerably lower in comparison to the other polities included in this sample,²⁴ bringing with it less pressure from the public to use these tools.

The length of time a parliament may have been on social media and its number of users are important indicators, but they say little about actual activity within those accounts – though of course they are likely to be related: the more discussions take place, the more followers it is likely to have. To assess the levels of activity we now turn to our sample of postings collected between November 2011 and February 2012.²⁵ Figure 2 shows the total number of postings made by each chamber.

²² Parliamentary official, (January 2012), Portuguese parliament, Interview with the author.

²³ As a term of comparison, the European Parliament has a team of five members of staff whose main role is to manage the parliament’s social media (within a team of 22 editors for all web based material content, besides an added webmaster team, and another dedicated to EuroparlTV – Interview, parliamentary official, European Parliament, November 2010). The UK Parliament has a team of 21 people working in the Web and Intranet Service, with the one member of staff having the responsibility for managing the social media institutional accounts (Parliamentary official, (November 2010), Houses of Parliament, Interview with the author; Parliamentary official, (2010, 14 December), Email message to author; Parliamentary Official, (2012, 3 January), Email message to author). Although these values may have varied on the margins, they indicate the size of these teams. Number of MPs in each of these parliaments: European, 766; Portuguese, 230; UK, 650.

²⁴ See, for example, the following two indicators: Household with internet access: EU (73%), France (76%), Portugal (58%), UK (83%); Individuals using internet in last three months: EU (71%), France (78%), Portugal (55%), UK (85%) (Eurostat, 2013a, 2013b); data for Scotland shows very similar values to the UK (Household with internet access (82%), Users of internet (85%), Office for National Statistics, 2013).

²⁵ As the House of Lords Facebook account only started in March 2012, after our sampled period, the posts from this account are not included in the analysis of the sampled period. So any activity data from the sample period specific to the House of Lords refers to its Twitter account.

Figure 2: Total number of postings by each chamber during the sampled period

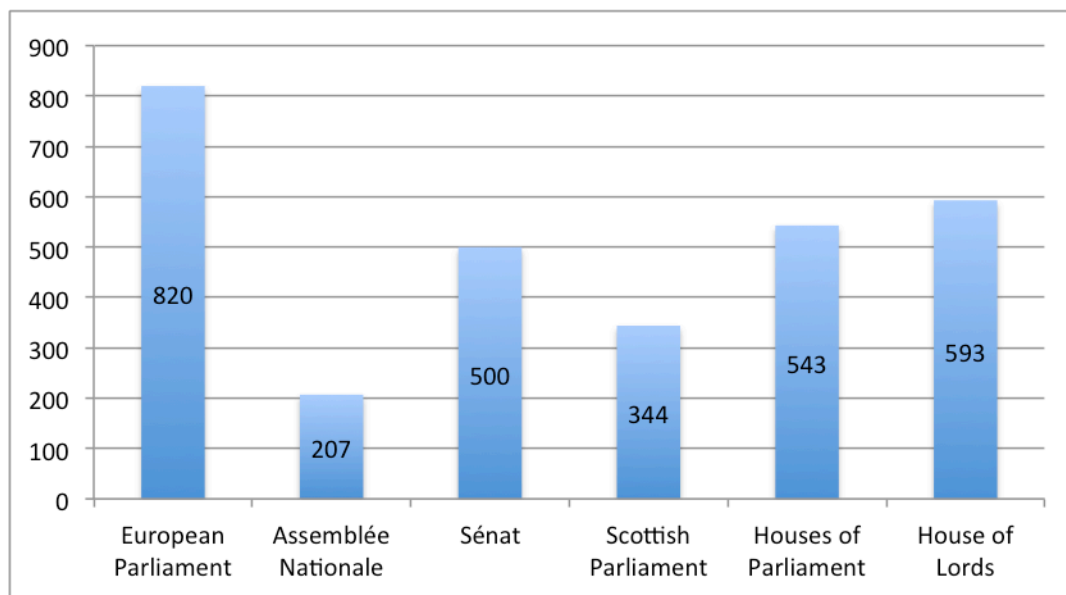


Figure 2 shows that the EP and the two upper chambers are amongst the most active on social media. In the French case, the Senate truly overpasses the lower chamber in volume of activity. Interestingly, these three chambers are also those in our sample with the most questioned legitimacy. As institutions' legitimacy has been questioned, together with an increase in political apathy, parliaments have reinforced direct links with the public. This has led to the development of new policies and services, and considerable investment specifically on public engagement (Hansard Society, 2011b; IPU, 2012; Leston-Bandeira, 2013). This is particularly clear in those institutions most questioned, such as the EP, where very considerable investment has been made in new units specifically focused on engaging with the public, such as the new Web Communications unit created in 2007 (Leston-Bandeira, 2012b: 11). The French Senate also made a clear decision to invest in this area (Costa et al, 2013: 42), well before the lower chamber. And the House of Lords has been involved in a number of innovative public engagement programmes from very early on, from the Lords of the Blog²⁶ collaborative blog to the Peers in Schools programme.²⁷ If we take the ratio between number of postings and number of representatives of each chamber though, the Scottish Parliament comes across as the most active in social media, followed by the EP. On all measures, the French lower chamber is clearly the less active.

Figure 2 indicates that these are the institutions making the most use of social media, as a path to engage with the public. The volume of activity is also linked of course to the fact of being early adopters. In the case of the House of Lords' twitter account, this was not part of the early

²⁶ <http://lordsoftheblog.net/> - accessed 21/07/2013.

²⁷ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/lords/lord-speaker/outreach-programme/peers-in-schools/> - accessed 21/07/2013.

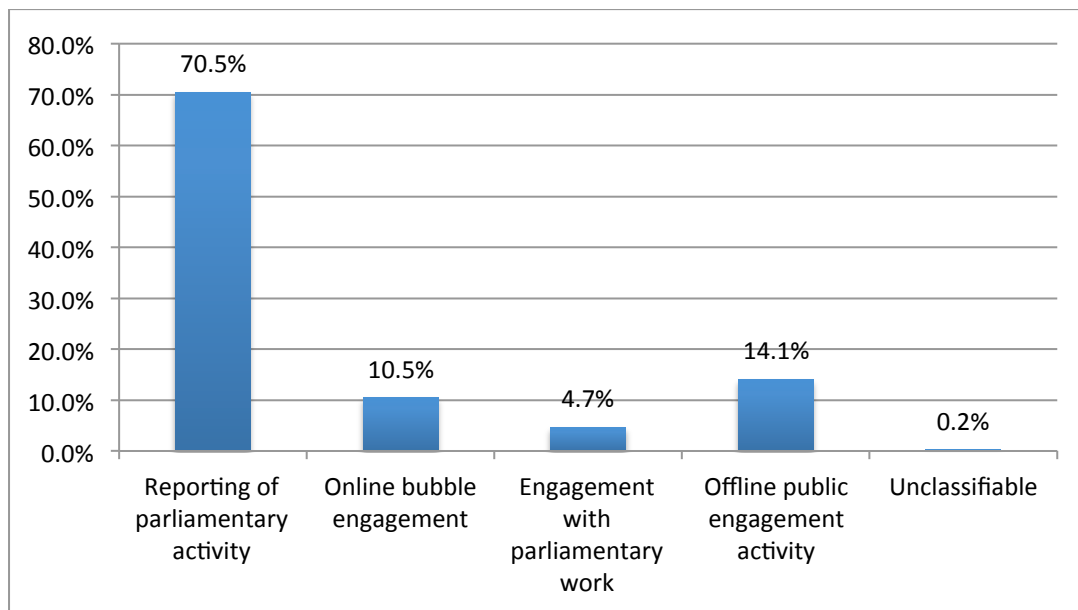
adopters, though as the Houses of Parliament's accounts actually encompass both lower and upper chamber, the expertise of running these accounts, and a potential pool of followers, were therefore already in place. The social media parliamentary accounts give an extra channel to speak directly with the public and to affirm what these institutions are about; and it is those institutions with the strongest need to affirm their role that are making the most of this. What Figure 2 does not show us though is what these chambers are talking about; and whether there is anyone listening. In the next section we analyse the contents of these postings.

6. For what purposes do parliaments use social media?

So for what purposes are parliaments utilising social media? Has this become a new tool of substantive engagement or is it merely another channel to provide information? The vast majority of the postings done by parliaments fall into the latter; that is, unsurprisingly, parliaments' postings in social media tend to be mainly reports on parliamentary activity taking place. However, in the margins there is also evidence of public engagement taking place.

As Figure 3 shows, the vast majority of parliaments' postings in social media, 71%, is to report on parliamentary activity. These postings consist typically of announcements about parliamentary work: reports published, sessions about to take place, enquiries, committee work etc. In short, postings aiming to disseminate parliamentary business. In terms of public engagement these refer therefore to its most basic levels, of provision of information. In fact 44% of all postings refer uniquely to timetabling issues – when specific events are due to take place. These consist therefore of “safe” postings, where it is simpler to make un-biased statements. It often comes in a traditional formal style of communication. Though it is also worth noting that 8% of all postings refer to specific MPs' actions. This is surprising seeing parliamentary officials' strong focus on avoiding anything political or anything that may be interpreted as biased towards a specific politician or political group. A closer look at the 234 postings referring to specific representatives shows that the vast majority of these come from the EP (58%) and the French Senate (37%). These two chambers have a distinctly less formal style of communication.

Figure 3 – Content of parliaments’ social media postings (N= 3007)



It is within the remaining 29% of the postings that more explicit evidence of engagement emerges, although mostly still at the lower levels of the ladder of engagement. Within these postings, a considerable proportion consist of purely public engagement activities aiming to disseminate the more cultural, historical and educational significance of these institutions; these are postings that are not related to on-going parliamentary business directly. They may refer to a quiz question or, for example, visits to parliament. As Figure 3 shows, 11% of these are mere online events – those within the online bubble engagement category. They do not refer to any specific on-going parliamentary activity and are created purely to promote interest for the institution. Adding to these, 14% of the postings refer to public engagement taking place offline – specific events or, for instance, news articles about parliamentary engagement. Both of these types of postings reflect therefore a more active approach to engagement from the institution, by trying to promote interest and understanding for parliamentary matters.

The final category (other than unclassifiable) is where more substantive engagement occurs. This refers to postings that involve actual engagement with on-going parliamentary work. Instances inviting responses to an enquiry, for example, petitions, or other instances where the aim of the posting is to encourage engagement that would lead to actual participation. As Figure 3 shows this amounts to 5% of all social media parliamentary postings. There are, however, clear differences across the chambers with two distinct groups: the engagement oriented group and the information group, as demonstrated by Table 3.

Table 3: Content of parliaments' social media postings, per Chamber (N= 3007)

	Scottish Parliament	European Parliament	Sénat	Assemblée Nationale	Houses of Parliament	House of Lords
Reporting of parliamentary activity	47.7%	61.3%	53.8%	80.7%	89.1%	89.9%
Online bubble engagement	23.5%	10.6%	22.6%	8.2%	2.9%	0.5%
Engagement with parliamentary work	3.2%	4.5%	15.4%	0.5%	2.6%	0.0%
Offline public engagement activity	25.6%	23.2%	8.0%	10.1%	5.3%	9.6%
Unclassifiable	0.0%	0.4%	0.2%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%

The information group includes the French Assemblée Nationale and the UK parliament's accounts, where the institutional social media accounts are mainly used to report on-going parliamentary activity; over 80% (nearly 90% in the UK case) of the postings aim to inform, not necessarily engaging or establishing a conversation. Overall, the UK parliament comes across as particularly cautious in their use of social media, maintaining a more formal approach to communication; although, as explained above, this parliament also has numerous other social media accounts, some of which specifically focused on engagement, such as @UKParlOutreach or @visitparliament. Our data may simply reflect a decision to utilise the institutional main account to report on-going parliamentary business, keeping strictly engagement matters to other accounts. In the specific case of the House of Lords, a key aim of engagement is to persuade citizens of the peers' capacity for expert scrutiny and contributions to law-making. As such, highlighting parliamentary material is arguably a rational approach.

The engagement group includes the EP, the French upper house and the Scottish Parliament (SP) – chambers strongly focused on raising their visibility. The SP in particular stands out. Holyrood's social media is mainly focused on engagement: contrary to the overall trend, the majority of its postings (52.3%) are for engagement. This is partially for strategic reasons, partially a statistical quirk. The SP promotes its weekly online-TV show, 'Holyrood Highlights', multiple times, on both social networks, which arbitrarily drives up this count. But this is also a parliament with a strong public engagement policy, right from its inception. To be open and encourage participation is one of the founding key principles of the SP, as repeatedly explained on their literature, website and by every single official and representative we interviewed; this is clearly reflected in its social media activity.²⁸ The French Senate, on the other hand, stands out by its comparatively high proportion (15%) of postings specifically focused on developing engagement with on-going parliamentary work,

²⁸ Interviews Scottish Parliament, November 2010, April and June 2011.

although this may be another statistical quirk: the chamber was heavily promoting a single inquiry, using a large number of postings, which is unusual, both for the chambers in the sample (typically no more than five postings are ever dedicated to a single event), and also for the Sénat in out-of-sample postings.

Overall social media are being used therefore mainly at the lowest levels of engagement to report information, although with differences between parliaments. Postings rarely ask for citizen input, and even when they do, typically do so within the online bubble, not relating that information back to MPs, committees or party groups. As explained above, social media are not necessarily the most natural tools for parliaments to use and still very new, with the first international guidelines only published in 2013; it will take time before parliaments have fully adapted to this new mode of communication.

Social media is designed for one-to-one or one-to-few social interactions, or for one-to-many information broadcast. Since parliaments are accountable to such a large number of citizens, it is not technologically easy for parliaments to cultivate 'listening' relationships with such large numbers of people offering content in ways that is not necessarily conducive to analysis. A tweeted reply or Facebook comment is not information which is systematised in a way that parliaments can effectively sort through and analyse, in the same way as a reply to a consultation, where parliament has posed a series of specific questions. Likewise, the parliamentary official behind the social media feed is often not able to engage into a conversation, when that may lead to expressing a specific point of view. It is somewhat difficult to sustain a neutral political conversation.

Still there are small steps towards a more integrated approach to social media. Interactive content also includes links to traditional-style consultations, and parliaments have found ways of leveraging Twitter in ways that can act as many-to-one engagement exercises by offering citizens simple ways of systematising their content. For instance, the #AskGove experiment in January 2012 where citizens were asked to provide questions to the UK Education Select Committee to pose to Education Secretary, Michael Gove. This led to 5081 tweets being posted in five days, which were then used to support the oral evidence session with Gove.²⁹ This is an example of integration of social media with parliamentary work for engagement with citizens; but it does also raise questions in relation to the human resources and processes needed to manage this citizens' input.

²⁹ UK Parliament, 'Michael Gove answers #AskGove twitter questions during Education Committee evidence session' www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news/secretary-of-state-ev-session/ - accessed 23 August 2013.

Aside from parliamentary proclivity, we might also wonder if citizens are primed for making contributions to parliament. As discussed above, citizens need to be informed about parliament, understand it and identify it as a relevant institution to their day-to-day, before being likely to contribute meaningfully to proceedings. These are key challenges prior to substantive engagement and our sample shows evidence of parliaments using social media to address those lower levels of awareness and understanding. The postings purely focused on engagement reflect this. This is particularly clear in the case of the EP, where considerable effort is made to promote the institution's presence and identity, but also the European Union itself. This is a parliament relentlessly showing that it matters as an institution, but also continuously defending the value of its polity, the EU. It is within the EP that we see, for instance, the most sophisticated usage of Facebook to facilitate political conversations, exemplified in the 47 live Chats it has run since March 2011.³⁰ But then, as explained above, this is an institution that has made a clear and considerable investment on web communications, with a team of officials specifically working on this.

7. Conclusion

The use of social media by parliaments is still in its infancy. Despite the hype about this tool to support a more participatory style of democracy, its adoption by parliaments is still timid, with however evidence of some usage for more substantive public engagement. These social media accounts are mainly about providing information about parliamentary business, embodying therefore a passive type of engagement. However, about a third of this usage reflects a more active approach to engagement, guiding the public to better understand the role and characteristics of these institutions. And a small proportion of the postings specifically facilitate more direct engagement with parliamentary work. There are, however, considerable differences between chambers.

Whilst our general analysis showed that parliaments in Latin America are well ahead in their adoption of social media to the European ones, our sample analysis demonstrated that it is those institutions with the most questioned legitimacy, such as the EP and the French Senate, which are the most active in their use of social media to support public engagement. The SP, on the other hand, whilst less active, is the one with the clearest focus on a more substantive engagement use of social media, in line with its overall enshrined commitment to openness and participation. Our analysis also demonstrates that the infrastructures in place matter considerably to the way these accounts are used and effective social media activity requires better resources. The Portuguese

³⁰ By August 2013.

Parliament, for instance, has little capacity to develop a proper social media presence, being very aware that developing effective conversations with the public requires time and expertise. This is well exemplified in the case of the French Senate, where social media is managed by an external professional communications company.

To a large extent parliaments have joined social media because they have to; it is an unavoidable tool of communication in today's society. This does not mean that it has changed much about how parliaments operate or led to substantive engagement. However, it has become a useful tool at the more basic levels of engagement and where it is more active, rather than a passive repository of information, it could influence people's views and predisposition to engage further. Finally, there is some evidence, not just from our sampled parliaments, of legislatures starting to develop processes to integrate these tools more effectively into parliamentary business.

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