

BLOG POST 04.05.2018

Follower-Power In 2019 the EP should reach out to young Europeans

Paul-Jasper Dittrich

Research Fellow at the Jacques Delors Institut - Berlin



The last European elections in 2014 saw a very low turnout, especially among young Europeans. In order to turn the tide, the European Parliament should engage more actively with European citizens on social media ahead of the 2019 elections. In this blog post, Paul-Jasper Dittrich examines the day-to-day social media communication of European officials and proposes a comprehensive “get-out-the-vote” online campaign for the Parliament supported by European influencers and local offline networks to encourage young Europeans to go to the polls.

1 The 2019 EP elections – a mobilization challenge

With 42.61 percent, voter turnout [reached a historic low](#) in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections. Younger voters tended to stay away from the ballot box in even larger numbers: Only about [one in four young](#) Europeans (28 percent of 18-24- year-olds) voted. There is no all-encompassing explanation for these low rates of mobilization and lack of interest in the European project. Various historical, political and societal factors play a role. One prevalent factor, however – and a recurring criticism directed at the EU and its institutions – is that European politics seems removed from everyday life. Without a real European public sphere (demos) and without strong, direct and emotionally binding connections between EU institutions and citizens, turnout in European Parliament elections will likely remain low.

Looking ahead to the upcoming elections between May 23rd and May 26th 2019, a similarly low turnout or yet another drop ought to be avoided. An uptick in turnout on the other hand, especially among the youngest eligible Europeans (between 18-35 years), members of the “Generation Z (18-24 years old)” and the “Generation Easyjet (25-35 years old)” of millennials, would send a strong signal of revival in the European project.

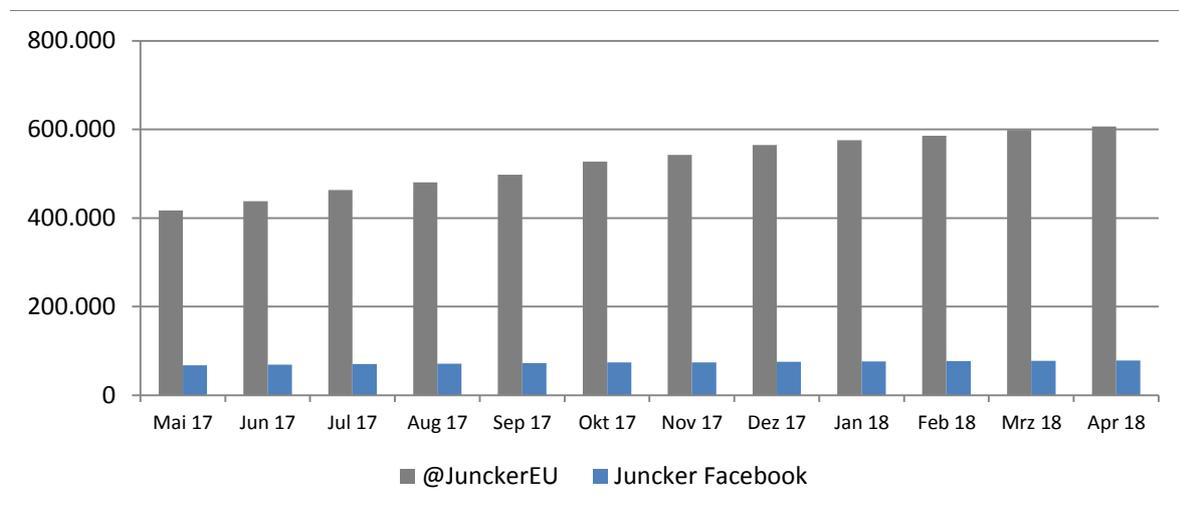
Reversing the trend will require a communications strategy that fully reflects the changes in the media and political communications landscape of the last five years. The ascent of social media has continued unabated since the last EP election in 2014. The EU is a regular subject of lively debate in traditional media (especially in European quality newspapers and on national TV broadcasters), but the influence of these outlets over the political discourse in most member states is waning, in particular among younger generations, while the importance of social networks for political communication is [steadily growing](#). Social media platforms now play a much more central role in shaping public discourse, and not only during electoral campaigns.

How does the EU deal with these changes? How do European officials make use of social networks? And, critically, what could an effective social media campaign with the aim of increasing young voters’ turnout look like? Which channels and strategies should be used? This blog post is divided into two parts. Based on [Quintly](#) data, the first part examines social media communication by Commission officials exemplified by the pertinent profiles of Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on Twitter and Facebook. The second part explores possible channels and strategies for a concerted “get-out-the-vote” campaign on social media in the run-up to the 2019 elections.

2 Caught in the Twitter and Brussels bubble?

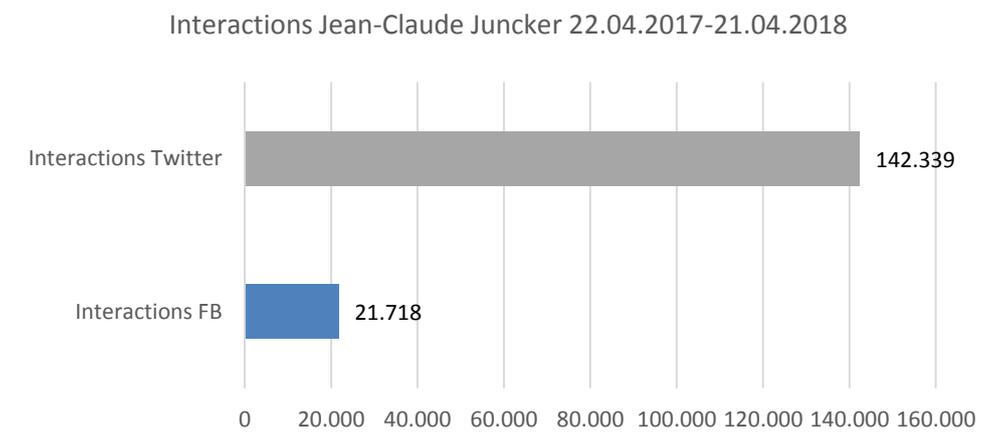
At first sight, the EU and its institutions are well represented on social media. All Commissioners are on at least one social network as well as the institutions themselves, distinct DGs and most senior EU staff. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans, and Competition Commissioner Margarethe Vestager are among the most prolific users. The institutional page of the European Parliament itself has an impressive two million followers. The Council, Commission and Parliament have accounts on other networks such as Instagram, YouTube and SnapChat. However, a deeper examination shows that most social

media activity undertaken by EU institutions and individual Commissioners is focused on one social network: Twitter. The micro-blogging service is not only the most frequented social network but also the one with the largest reach for European officials.



Number of Twitter followers and Facebook Fans of Jean-Claude Juncker, 01.01.2017-01.04.2018, source: Quintly.

This can be illustrated by looking at the fans and interaction data of Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The number of his Twitter followers exceeds that of his Facebook followers by a factor of almost ten (700,000 followers on Twitter, but fewer than 75,000 on Facebook). The Commission President (i.e. his communications team) also published considerably fewer posts on Facebook and accordingly had much lower interaction rates (see chart below). Even after discounting for bots and fake accounts, which are [more prevalent on Twitter](#) than on Facebook and could amount to up to a third of followers, this difference is still striking.



Number of total interactions (Likes, comments, shares) of Jean-Claude Juncker, 22.04.2017-21.04.2018, source: Quintly.

This imbalance between Twitter and Facebook applies to EU representatives more broadly. Other high-level EU officials with a remarkable discrepancy between their Twitter and Facebook followers include:

- Competition Commissioner Margarethe Vestager: 240,000 followers on Twitter vs. 57,700 fans on Facebook

- Budget Commissioner Günther Oettinger: 49,700 Twitter followers, Facebook profile defunct
- High Representative Federica Mogherini: 464,000 Twitter followers, 90,400 Facebook fans

A noteworthy exception is Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans who has a much larger audience on Facebook than on Twitter (213,000 v. 80,500).

To understand how this imbalance between Twitter and Facebook (and other social networks such as Instagram or YouTube) affects online discourses around the EU it is important to recapitulate the differences in audience and functioning between the two most relevant social networks for political communication. First, Twitter is much less a social network for the masses than Facebook. Facebook had more than 2 billion monthly active users worldwide in Q4 2018 (364 million in Europe alone). That is roughly six times more than the total number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide (330 million in Q4 2018). Second, Twitter users don't accurately represent European demographics. In most European member states (the UK or the Netherlands are noteworthy exceptions) Twitter serves as a professional discursive arena for policy wonks, journalists, businesspeople and other media multipliers. Facebook, on the other hand, still represents the most important "network for everybody" and it will probably stay that way, at least in the near to medium term.

In a nutshell, Twitter is the ideal tool for political communication and to share ideas in the business of day-to-day politics, but not necessarily the most important one to engage with the "average" EU citizen and voter who will be the crucial target for mobilization efforts in the run-up of the 2019 election campaign.

3 What are the Parliament's plans?

The difficulties in mobilizing young people to vote during the last election has also spotlighted the EU institutions' efforts to engage online with the public in general. As shown by way of example above, European officials tend to focus on reaching stakeholders and multipliers via Twitter instead of engaging with a wider audience on Facebook and other popular networks. While this constitutes an effective strategy for day-to-day politics, it forgoes opportunities to build lasting online communities that can be activated and leveraged during election campaigns.

The European Parliament itself is of course aware of the importance of the digital public sphere and there are already some hints about what its media strategy for next year's elections might look like: In a [leaked note from November 2017](#), its General Secretariat issued an outline strategy proposal, highlighting the vital role of online tools and social media in mobilizing voters. It further describes key communication channels and sketches out a media / social media as well as an on-the-ground ground-game strategy for transmitting the EU's relevance for ordinary people and the importance of the 2019 elections in particular. The note also singles out young people as a crucial target group for a social media-driven message. However, while it provides detailed proposals on the traditional media strategy (an "alliance building road show" targeting editors of major European newspapers, press seminars in Brussels for approximately 3000 journalists and bulking up EP press offices in member states) it remains remarkably vague on the concrete steps required to leverage social media (e.g. "use of modern digital campaign tools to animate and feed multipliers and supporters").

4 How to get young Europeans to vote

The EP Facebook account has more than 2.4 million fans. This is already a very large base on which to build towards the 2019 elections. However, in order to counter the trend of apathy and indifference towards Europe among young people, the EU must become much more visible and engaged in the entire digital public sphere. Concretely, the European Parliament should conceptualize and run a comprehensive, multi-channel social media campaign with a “get-out-the-vote” message targeted specifically at demographic groups with historically high abstention rates. Other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or Snap Chat, which are primarily used by younger age cohorts and offer better possibilities for a visual and “authentic” communication, must become part of such a comprehensive online communications strategy. Apart from the choice of channels, three essential elements should be:

- a) Crafting the right message for social media,
- b) Identifying the right influencers and
- c) Building local and national online and offline support networks.

Message: During the upcoming election campaign the EP should communicate a very straightforward, yet politically neutral get-out-the-vote message to boost turnout and thereby the legitimacy of the European democratic process. This message should have an emotional appeal, be “authentic” and set out why the elections and the EU itself matter for everyday life in Europe. The Erasmus program and especially its expansion to young Europeans in training, the end of roaming charges or recent initiatives such as “The Free Interrail Campaign” are some of the most salient and tangible examples for the impact of the EU on the daily life of young European citizens.

Influencers from outside the EU box: A credible and effective #EP2019 communications campaign should collaborate with social media influencers with no obvious or direct relation to the EU. These are social media accounts with a very large follower base (sport stars, celebrities, vloggers etc.) who often cultivate a strong and interactive relationship with their followers in their daily lives. Influencers could be leveraged for a get-out-the-vote campaign specifically on those social networks that primarily target the younger generation such as Snapchat, YouTube or Instagram. In the last German national election, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) for example asked [players from the German national football team](#), popular actors and other celebrities to write short online messages on why they would vote for Angela Merkel. These messages were then distributed via various social media channels. By analogy, a (non-partisan) EU-wide “get-out-the-vote” campaign could be supported by European players from Champions League teams or by Eurovision song contest winners. Cristiano Ronaldo or Robert Lewandowski for example could be asked to address their large follower base on Instagram and encourage them to vote.

Integration of offline networks: Current pro-European bottom-up communities such as the numerous [#Pulse of Europe](#) groups scattered across the Union could become active channels for a get-out-the-vote campaign. They should be supported logistically with online campaigning material or apps to create local events around the European elections. These groups could also serve as credible neutral multipliers as they would be strictly non-party and simply encourage young people to vote.

The great potential of effective and borderless social media communication is still largely untapped by EU institutions. Young Europeans tend to be among the most pro-European demographic groups. If the European Parliament can enthusiastically and effectively communicate the right message on the right channels it might increase turnout among them: and greater participation by young people is often the best weapon against populist/nativist Euro-sceptics.

Bild: Yutaka Seki, blue line. / Flickr CC BY 2.0 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/yutakaseki/32943132195/>

Herausgeber: Prof. Dr. Henrik Enderlein. Die Publikation gibt ausschließlich die persönliche Auffassung der Autoren wieder. Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

Nachdruck und sonstige Verbreitung – auch auszugsweise – nur mit Quellenangabe zulässig.

Originalfassung © Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin, 2018.

