RETHINKING PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Social Media Networks as a Digital Public Sphere for European Politics

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Abstract

The digital structure of social networking sites hold vast democratic value in light of the democratic deficit in the European Union. The sites have increased the possibility for the public of European citizens to participate in politics through cross-border deliberation, and has potential to constitute as a digital European public sphere. However, no approach in the works on political participation online has so far put forward an empirical actor-focused analysis of how the European public is truly utilising this potential. This thesis address these shortcomings in current research and aims to investigate the digital European public sphere and the public of European citizens' participation in European politics through social networking sites. In order to do so, a qualitative content analysis with a directed approach is applied as the research method. An analytical framework based on previous research and key theoretical considerations is used as a coding scheme for organisation and analysis of data collected from the European Parliament's official Twitter account. The thesis' analysis indicates that the public of European citizens make use of Twitter's potential for political deliberation in many noteworthy ways. In particular, the public showed a strong critical function and there is little deviation from the topic of EU policy during the discussions on the site. Yet, it may be too early to speak of a fully European digital public sphere.

Figures and Tables

Abbreviations

EP – European Parliament

EPS – European Public Sphere

EU – European Union

ICTs – Information and Communication Technologies

MPs – Members of Parliament

SNSs – Social Networking Sites

CONTENT

I. Introduction

Political participation is one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy. In the case of the European Union (EU) however, declining participation and interest in EU policy issues among European citizens are today a grim reality. Statistics indicate a fading interest in public debate on EU policy issues and that a continuously decreasing number of Europeans participate in EU parliamentary elections (Eurostat, 2018). As such, the democratic deficit in the EU is becoming more and more evident. The past few years have also been filled with various challenges for the Union and the increasingly problematic participation rates of the EU, its democratic deficit, often lies at the core of these. While exploring key mechanisms that can help facilitate and advance the democratic process between European citizens and the EU institutions, several researchers have found it necessary to strengthen the deliberative European public sphere (EPS) (Michailidou 2008, Vesnic-Alujevic and Nacarino 2012).

Surprisingly, little research has been concerned with the EPS and the public of European citizens' political participation on EU policy issues in the context of Europe's increasingly digitalised society. Through the spread of Internet-based technologies in the last two decades, new tools for political participation have become accessible. The digital era has particularly given rise to a democratic promise of increased public deliberation, as the growth of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have revitalised the ways in which people communicate. This thesis sets out to address these shortcomings in current research and underlines that the deliberative and cross-border potential of SNSs play a noteworthy role in the case of the EU and its democratic deficit. A role which so far has been largely overlooked in academic works within the field of European studies.

The question is no longer whether the Internet should be considered to hold the potential to enhance democratic participation across the European borders and empower citizens through SNSs, but rather how citizens utilise this potential. Thus, the thesis is guided by the following question: '*In what ways do the public of European citizens make use of social networking sites as a digital European public sphere for political deliberation on EU policy issues?*'. To answer this question, an analytical framework drawing on theoretical considerations from literature (Țarta 2017) and public sphere theory will be applied to the analysis of European citizens' communication on Twitter. The framework's criteria takes various aspects of the European

public's deliberation practices on the site into consideration and can thus shed light on the ways in which SNSs are utilised as a EPS.

II. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. After this introduction (Chapters I and II), Chapter III highlights the thesis' key theoretical foundations through presentation and discussion of a selection of literature on relevant topics. Following the findings of the reviewed literature in Chapter III, Chapter IV presents the thesis' aim, main research question, and sub-questions. Chapter V outlines the thesis data selection and methodology with respective limitations and considerations. Further, Chapter VI proceeds with an analysis of the data through application of the coding framework and its criteria for how to evaluate the European public on Twitter. Finally, Chapter VII presents concluding remarks, a concise summary of the thesis' findings, highlights from the analysis, as well as considerations for potential future research.

III. Theoretical Foundations

This chapter outlines the thesis' theoretical foundations in online political participation and public sphere theory. The chapter has three focal points. First, it will present and discuss a selection of literature on political participation on the Internet in general, and on SNSs in particular. Second, public sphere theory and its significance while considering European citizens' political deliberation is presented with an emphasis on linking the theory to an approach that highlights SNSs as a key transformative factor in politics. Third, it will take a closer look at efforts made in prior research to put the debate on political participation online into the context of the EU. Theoretical considerations on the case of the EU is thus made, with a focus on its democratic deficit and the role of the Union as a facilitator of political participation online. The chapter will set out with a concise definition of 'political participation' to then in a thematic fashion highlight and challenge key existing published literature in accordance with the foci above. It concludes with a defined research gap, which this thesis seeks to contribute towards filling.

A. Political Participation Online

In this section, the thesis' central concept of political participation online is presented. Firstly, the term itself is defined and the thesis' focus on deliberation is established. Further, previous academic literature on political participation online is presented and three main strands of thought on the topic are identified and discussed. The section concludes with a more narrow discussion on political participation on SNSs.

(1) Political Participation as Online Deliberation: Defining the Concept

Before addressing theoretical considerations on political participation, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term itself. Political participation has traditionally been understood in a broad sense as the acts, or actions, which citizens take to influence politics (Segesten and Bossetta 2017a, 1626). This classic understanding's focus on the actions appears to preclude citizens' new and increased use of digital communication technologies as a political tool. The concrete actions one can perform through a computer or mobile device are limited to mouse clicks and keystrokes. Through increasing the level of abstraction and dismantling the term, political participation can advantageously instead be understood as a concept of several forms. The main features of political participation are that it is; 1) an activity (to simply have an interest in politics does not count as participation), 2) voluntary (not obliged under law), 3) activities of people in their role as non-professionals (not as for example politicians) 4) concerned with politics or government (non-restricted to certain phases such as parliamentary elections). Hence, political participation can be any voluntary, non-professional activity concerning politics or government (van Deth 2016).

This thesis rests on this developed definition of political participation as a concept of several forms as it takes various types of political behaviour into consideration and does not limit itself to its traditional practices. As society has seen a spread of Internet-based technologies in the last decades, new tools for political participation have become accessible for citizens. While discussing political participation, it has thus become necessary to do so with this extended understanding of the term in mind. Further, this thesis has a focus on participation in the context of political deliberation. Deliberation is a common form of political participation and plays a significant role in politics. Deliberative forums are used by government bodies to consult citizens in policy decisions and is often seen as a process with the ability to deepen citizen engagement with both institutions and decision-makers.

Deliberation has played an important role in democratic theory over the years and is an ancient element of democracy itself. As argued by Myers and Mendelberg (2013), a 'deliberative turn' have taken place in democratic theory during the last several decades. This has increased the emphasis on the democratic importance of deliberation, particularly in contrast to traditional democratic features. The increased scholarly interest for political deliberation has resulted in several definitions of the term. This thesis applies the definition proposed by Myers and Mendelberg, who describes it as "…small-group discussion intended to make a decision or to change the content or basis of public opinion that is either prompted by or speaks to a governmental unit or political actor. The political actor need not be the government; it can be any person or organization with power or authority in society" (Myers and Mendelberg 2013, 700). As this thesis moves on to analyse the relationship between SNSs and citizens' political participation, it does so with an emphasis on the democratic importance of deliberation as per this definition.

(2) Theorising Political Participation Online: Three Strands of Current Research

In the last two decades, a vast body of literature has emerged concerned with the political, and namely democratic, effects of society's new digital media environment. This research within the fields of political science and communication studies has predominantly focused on political communication of parties, censorship and cybersecurity (Jacob 2009, Owen 2015, Reddick and Aikins 2012, Stromer-Galley 2014). Over time however, as the Internet and SNSs have become a fundamental part of citizens' everyday life, scholars have started to adapt a more bottom-up approach and extended the research scope further. As research is moving forward and incorporates more democratic aspects, it has shaped discussions on if and how Internet-technologies can be used as tools for political participation.

Within these discussions, three stances can typically be found. First, some scholars have taken a critical position towards all online political activities. Several earlier academic works concerned with political participation online concluded that political discussions on the Internet are based around verbal fighting and singular statements, rather than deliberative dialogue (Dahlberg 2001, Wilhelm 1999). However, as argued by Winsvold (2013), early works on the subject also had a tendency to assume that political discussion aims to reach a mutual agreement about problems and solutions in line with the deliberative ideal. Subsequently, other democratic

qualities of online debates may have been neglected in these works due to a persistent focus on an unreachable deliberative norm (Winsvold 2013, 3).

In her research, Winsvold moves beyond the assumptions made in these early works and explores the democratic value of online debates with an extended analytical focus. Instead of resting on deliberative democratic theory and ideals alone, a broader framework that also includes participatory and competitive democratic ideals is employed in her study. Through application of this framework to a sample of postings from Norwegian newspaper-hosted online forums, Winsvold find traces of a participatory and competitive democratic ideal that indicates that online forums indeed holds a democratic value. To hold a solely cynical stance towards online participation based on deliberative ideals, alike these early works, is seemingly to neglect other indications of the phenomenon's democratic value.

Another common critique towards online participation in previous research is that while activities such as signing petitions or debating online are similar to their traditional offline counterparts, they are not as meaningful (Jensen 2013, Papacharissi 2009). This notion is often based on the argument that online activities are not distinctly political as they do not target politicians or political organisations. Others have gone as far as rejecting political activities online as 'slacktivism' for being too simple and only being carried out through mouse clicks (Morozov 2011). On the other hand, the term 'hacktivism', to overthrow a computer system for a political or social cause, is seen by many scholars as an elitist and limited action. Moreover, in research that takes a critical stance towards all online political activities, the concept of distinct and traditional forms of participation is favoured to such extent that the works often only aims to seek out how online activities translates into 'real life' offline participation (Tolbert and McNeal 2003, Xenos and Moy 2007).

However, some scholars have also sought to move beyond this persistent emphasis on the traditional modes of participation (Best and Krueger 2005, Bimber 2003, Gibson et al. 2005). The second main understanding of political participation online draws on this consideration. It highlights that online participation requires a different type of conceptual framework, as the Internet opens up for new dimensions to it. Building on this idea of online participation as a 'new' form of participation, Gibson et al. (2005) presents a detailed model of how to conceptualise it. The authors introduce Internet-specific variables as explanatory factors that accounts for a wide range of participatory activities. The factors used by the authors include for example discussing politics in a chat group or joining an email discussion. Through application

of their framework on data gathered from a national survey of UK citizens, the authors finds support for the idea that the Internet is increasing the number of people that are politically active. Further, online forms of participation showed a tendency to initiate groups of people that are typically not active in the traditional modes of politics.

Various other scholars have also argued that citizens' increased use of the Internet calls for a new research approach to political participation. The Internet is understood to have qualities that are distinctive and differs from those traditionally associated with political participation (Anduiza et al. 2010, Hoffman et al. 2013).

> "…the ease of using and creating new communication channels, such as blogs, videos, and Web sites, has spawned an explosion of grassroots, bottom-up participation. Individuals can build a more active and significant relationship to official institutions as they feel empowered to express their opinions more openly and freely…the Internet may also bring elites and the public closer together, making it easier to express views to elected officials and established journalists" (de Zúñiga et al. 2010, 38).

De Zúñiga et al. (2010) underlines, alike Gibson et al. (2005), that different groups of people may feel encouraged to take part in political activities in the new ways offered by the Internet. The main argument behind this notion is that new alternative pathways to participation have made it available at a lower cost, and thus made it more accessible. Further, there is a possibility for new people to get drawn into politics because they come across political information in unintended ways. Potentially, it may even be the answer to declining participation rates overall (Vissers and Stolle 2014, 940).

Lastly, the third commonly held understanding among researchers is that political participation online is similar to its traditional offline counterparts. It should therefore merely be viewed as a different form of the same phenomenon. Further, and contrary to the belief of researchers in the second understanding, these academics believe that the Internet does not hold the ability to politically engage new parts of the public. In earlier works on the topic it is even considered if the Internet can change citizens' motivation or possibility to participate in politics at all (Klein 1999, Margolis and Resnick 2000). The line of thought behind this argument is that the already privileged groups in society are the ones who obtain access to more and new ways of communication through the Internet, and thus are the only ones that get to express

themselves. However, as access to the Internet has become more widespread since the publication of these works, a considerable larger number of citizens are today able to take advantage of the Internet as a space for political participation.

It is of importance to consider inequality among citizens as a factor for their access to the Internet and thus ability to participate in politics online. However, it is also necessary to critically review the stance taken in these works from the early 2000s and to put them in the context of today's comparably extensive access to the Internet. With this development in mind, Min (2010) expands the concept of a digital divide, the concern of the Internet to widen rather than diminish the inequalities of the populations' accessibility or motivation to participate politically online. Min argues that the digital divide will not likely disappear, instead "…the current Internet access divide will persist in the form of 'usage' divides" (Min 2010, 22). Through regression analysis, Min find indications that there are differences in Internet skill levels and interest in politics between those who are active politically online and those who are not. On the contrary to the earlier works, Min's research suggests that individual Internet skills and political attitudes may thus today have a larger impact on citizens' political participation online than socio-economic factors.

Most previous research on political participation online have found positive indications for its existence, significance and future potential. However, there is a limiting tendency to focus on how it translates into traditional offline modes of participation. Though one does not have to favour the digital environment over the 'real life' voting booth and town hall, it is important to recognise that digital environments such as SNSs hold vast democratic participatory potential in themselves, and not only constitutes as an extension to traditional forms of participation. Democratic potential in the form of a space for public debate, opinion expression, information sharing, and for citizens to exercise influence vertically and horizontally.

(3) Political Participation on Social Networking Sites

As Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have continued to evolve and scholarship has advanced, a strand of research has started to focus more specifically on the relationship between SNSs and political participation. The interest in SNSs is much due to their unique communicative nature which allow people to meet and create connections with others that may not have been made otherwise. SNSs have changed the ways in which the public communicate and subsequently created a need for researchers to rethink political deliberation.

This thesis rests on Boyd and Ellison (2008) definition of SNSs as "…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 211). Many SNSs support the upholding of peoples' pre-existing networks. However, several sites also connect strangers based on political views or shared interests. Some attract more diverse audiences, while others are tailored for a group of people based on a common language, religion or nationality.

Alike more general studies on political participation online, much of the works within this strand of research are concerned with how the participation taking place online through SNSs translates into traditional offline participation (Baumgartner and Morris 2010, Kahne and Bowyer 2018). Some works indicate a positive relationship between citizens' use of SNSs and their participation in offline modes of politics (Bode 2012, Park et al. 2009), while other scholars found no or a weak relationship (Valenzuela et al. 2009, Vitak et al. 2011). The results of a meta-analysis of current research in the field, carried out by Skoric et al. (2015) however suggests an overall positive relationship between social media usage and engagement. The authors found indications for the relationship in the majority of the works included in the analysis, while only a handful of negative findings were recognised.

Commonly featured aspects of engagement within these studies are political group membership (Conroy et al. 2012, Ekström and Sveningsson 2017), social movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), citizen electoral participation (Camaj and Santana 2015, Segesten and Bossetta 2017a), as well as politicians and parties' use of SNSs to campaign (Gibson and McAllister 2015, Jacobs and Spierings 2016). With a focus on political group membership, Conroy et al. (2012) poses the question 'In what ways do online groups help to foster political engagement among citizens?'. Their findings indicate that Facebook groups do foster political participation in a similar way to their offline counterparts. In particular, Facebook provide "…information, motivation for political action, and a forum for discussion and communicative exchanges" (Conroy et al. 2012, 1544). Though the study's findings only can be viewed as a preliminary step to understand SNSs potential for engaging citizens in political participation, it highlights the growing significance of SNSs for the political process.

Similar conclusions are drawn in studies concerned with other aspects of political participation on SNSs. While examining to what extent citizens use Twitter as a platform for political mobilisation in an electoral context, Segesten and Bossetta (2017a) finds that SNSs have a positive impact on citizens' political participation during elections. The authors develop a typology of political participation which is applied to Twitter data collected from the time of the 2015 British general elections. Their results shows that citizens are the primary initiators and sharers of political calls for action on Twitter. However, they also find that a smaller number of highly active citizen-users on Twitter, who represented challenger parties UKIP and SNP, accounted for an disproportionately large quantity of the shared content (Segesten and Bossetta 2017a, 1639). Such findings therefore calls to question of who actually engages in politics on SNSs and how well represented the public are on these sites?

In the Internet's early days, the gap between the public's access to, and therefore activity on, was dependent on their socio-economic status and gender. The inequalities that were found online often reflected the current corresponding inequalities between groups of people in offline societies. However, scholars have indicated that as time has passed and Internet access has become more widespread, these factors seem to have become less determining of who is active on SNSs. As argued in the previous section, Internet access has grown immensely in the last two decades. OECD reported in 2018 that the percentage of households with access to the Internet in Europe has more than doubled since 2005. Some countries like Lithuania and Czech Republic have seen an increase in access from 16 to 75 percent and 19 to 83 percent respectively. While other European countries, like Sweden and the Netherlands have reported that 94 and 98 percent respectively of its population had access to the Internet in 2017 (OECD, 2018). As such, a large part of the public in the European countries are today more active on the Internet and SNSs than ever before.

As argued in the previous section, this thesis seeks to move beyond the persistent understanding of online participation on SNSs as merely a bridge or extension to its offline counterpart. Because the majority of research within the field have been concerned with how online engagement translates into traditional offline participation, this thesis instead views SNSs as an arena for deliberation or a public sphere in itself. Thus, the theoretical concept of the public sphere is further laid out in the following section.

B. The Theoretical Concept of the Public Sphere

This section outlines the public sphere theory in three parts, highlighting its value as a theoretical foundation for this thesis. First, the theory is presented and considered within the context of an increasingly digitalised civil society. As such, a discussion on the idea of a digital public sphere and what the public sphere looks like on SNSs is carried out. Second, the argument against SNSs as a public sphere is presented, and common critique from previous research is discussed. The section concludes with considerations on the concept of a EPS.

(1) The Digital Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory plays a key role in this thesis' analysis as a theoretical foundation that helps conceptualise public political deliberation. Habermas' theory of the public sphere shed light on public deliberation through defining *who* the participants on the public sphere are or should be, the *process* through which these participants can carry out political deliberation, and what the political *purpose* and *impact* of the public sphere is. As summarised by Michailidou (2007), "Habermas' normative model of the public sphere is one in which a) potentially everyone has access to and no one enters into discourse with an advantage over another…b) is a realm in which individuals gather to participate in open discussions…and c) has the potential to be a foundation for a critique of a society based on democratic principles…" (Michailidou 2007, 17).

Habermas (1989) put an emphasis on the meaning of the word 'public' and what it means for occurrences to be just that. He argues that to call something public is to indicate that it is open to all, in contrast to exclusive or closed affairs. It is in this meaning of the word that the normative model of the public sphere is based. Habermas also requires the public sphere to be independent of commercial and governmental interests in order for rational critical debate to take place, and that the public have unlimited access to information. In contrast to opinion polls in which citizens opinions are registered, the public sphere has a role to create a platform for critical debate which can lead to political change. As such, the public sphere holds significant democratic value.

However, it is unlikely for a true, nearly utopian, public sphere (as by Habermas 1989) to exist. Even Habermas himself argued that the public sphere does not exist largely because of the corporate influence through money, particularly within the mass media. However, one needs

to also consider the time in which the theory was developed by Habermas. The theoretical concept's origin is in the 1960s, as it was first introduced in the German version of his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), later *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), and thus follows a highly hierarchical top-down model. Over the years, the meaning of the public sphere has transformed and extended with the development of the Internet. In many ways, the Internet, and SNSs in particular, are organised in ways that meet the fundamental elements of a public sphere. The general structure of SNSs may provide equal and protected participation, as well as unlimited access to information. The networks are also relatively accessible, particularly in Western democracies. If one have access to a technological device with an Internet connection, the majority and most popular SNSs are then free to use. In theory, any individual thus have the ability to distribute information which in turn makes participation and information acquisition free from outside influence (Kruse et al. 2017, 63).

As argued by de Zúñiga (2015, 3155), because citizens are provided with the possibility to learn about, deliberate and engage in politics, SNSs can be said to facilitate something that is similar to Habermas' public sphere. Several researchers have explored this potential (Halpern and Gibbs 2013, Papacharissi 2010, Sørensen 2016) with varying results and with a general focus on making theoretical arguments rather than using empirical data. A positive approach to the emergence to a digital public sphere is given by Sørensen (2016) who set out to explore the hope of a revitalisation of the public sphere through SNSs and examined the political conversations between Danish Members of Parliament (MPs) and citizens on the network Facebook. Contrary to the norm, the study purposely placed itself in a context that is outside the weeks of election campaigns as an attempt to gain an understanding for the everyday conversations.

Sørensen found that the majority of Danish MPs do have a dialogue with citizens on their Facebook pages. Many of the MPs also re-entered discussions on their posts more than once and many of the MPs' posts resulted in continued discussions among citizens. As such, Sørensen's research indicates that a digital public sphere may indeed be taking form online through SNSs. However, the study primarily mapped the political deliberation quantitatively and there is thus a need for future research to explore the actual quality of these conversations.

As argued in this section, SNSs have improved the ways in which the public can carry out discussions, debates and persuasion. Habermas (1989) public sphere has therefore gained a different, and possibly more relevant role for democracy in the digital era. In contrast to the positive conception portrayed in research discussed in this section, existing research in this field also presents negative views of SNSs as a public sphere for political deliberation. Future research that goes beyond theorising and instead adopts an empirical approach to the topic therefore holds a particularly important role. Some central critical works about the digital public sphere are further discussed in the following section.

(2) The Argument Against Social Networking Sites as a Public Sphere

The argument against SNSs as a public sphere has to date been twofold. First, it has focused on limited and non-equal access to information. The idea of equal participation and unlimited access to the Internet, and thus to SNSs, is thought to be an unrealistic ideal and the social barriers to accessing information contest the claim of a revitalisation of the public sphere on SNSs (Kruse et al. 2017, Papacharissi 2010). Kruse et al. (2017) argues that "promoting the idea that unlimited access and equal participation exist on social media ignores the social and political realities of contemporary society" (Kruse et al. 2017, 64).

This argument is largely in line with early research (Gimmler 2001) on how the Internet could shape the public sphere. During the early years of the twentieth century, academic works rightfully questioned citizens limited accessibility to the Internet and highlighted it as a barrier to the digital public sphere's existence. However, as argued in previous sections, there has since been a significant growth in the number of people who have access to the Internet and actively uses SNSs. Thus, the debate about a digital divide is no longer relevant, at least not while discussing and comparing the participation among European countries, as is the focus of this thesis.

The second claim against SNSs as a public sphere builds on the idea of institutional influence being too strong. Arguably, this notion is more relevant today than the first one. This argument stems from the presence and constrains caused by surveillance on SNSs (Marwick 2012, Trottier 2011). Surveillance is described by Lyon (2007) as the "focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection or directions" (Lyon 2007, 14). While discussing a digital public sphere, it is worth highlighting that the awareness of the surveillance presence, as suggested by Lyon's definition of it, can

make citizens alter their behaviour to become more appropriate. This monitoring of others may not only be by the state or big tech companies which own the networks, it can also be friends or employers that cause restraining behaviour among citizens on the Internet (Kruse et al. 2017, 65).

However, the critique against SNSs as a public sphere is unnecessarily cynical. As argued above, it is unrealistic for a true, nearly utopian, public sphere (as by Habermas 1989) to exist. Moreover, in contrast to general studies on the digital revitalisation of the public sphere that use the US or other nation sates as a case study, a more positive view is given in research that is concerned with how a EPS plays out in today's digitalised society (Segesten and Bossetta 2017b). As argued above, some of the critique and hinders that have been put forward, particularly regarding accessibility to the Internet, are not as apparent in the European societies. On the contrary, discussions on the democratic deficit in the EU are driving this thesis to explore the possibility of a digital revival of the EPS as a modern day response to the Union's democratic challenges. The theoretical concept of the EPS is thus explored in the following section.

(3) The European Public Sphere

There is a consensus in the academic community suggesting that some characteristics are fundamental for the EU to advance democratically. One of the most central of these is the existence of a strong deliberative public sphere. In the scholarly discussion on the EPS, the most posed questions is if one such public sphere already exists or if it is non-attainable. This thesis agrees with Fishkin et al. (2014) who takes a positive approach to the concept and argues that a light version of a EPS already indeed does exist. European citizens travel and talk in shared languages. Printed media, online media and television cover sufficiently salient stories in a European-wide context and European Parliamentary elections provide a form of European democratic accountability. However, as also argued by the authors, there are limitations to a fully developed EPS.

> "A more ambitious European public sphere would involve more truly Europe-wide collective will formation and political accountability. There would be much more common discussion of shared policy issues across linguistic and national boundaries and more voting or other forms of political action based on the opinions thus formed about those issues" (Fishkin et al. 2014, 329).

Similarly to Fishkin et al., van Os et al. (2007) finds indications for the existence of a EPS that contributes to a reduction of the democratic deficit in the EU. Their study explores the use of the Internet during the 2004 European Parliament (EP) election campaign and finds how more and more websites that are produced by various political actors have become available to citizens for political deliberation on European issues. Furthermore, while exploring the existence of a EPS in Television, Gripsrud (2007) considers what is meant by the term EPS itself and finds that the definition of the theoretical concept varies considerably.

Drawing on Lingenberg (2006, 123), Gripsrud (2007) puts forward three main views in the scholarly literature on the subject. The first view is that a "…European public sphere requires conditions similar to those of the national public spheres – a common language, a European-wide media system and citizens with a European identity". The second entails that "one can speak of a European public sphere where the national public spheres provide the infrastructure but where there is also more or less simultaneous reporting (and discussion) of European issues seen in a European perspective". Finally, the last one argues that "the European public sphere is a pluralistic ensemble of issue-oriented publics that exists once the same issues are discussed simultaneously and within a shared frame of relevance…" (Gripsrud 2007, 483). By only looking at the first of these understandings of the concept, the conclusion can be drawn that a fully EPS does not, and most likely will not in any near future, exist. However, through the second and third definition and consideration of what a EPS is, one could draw a positive conclusion of the phenomenon's existence, not least in a digital context on SNSs.

This thesis views European citizens as the driving force of the EPS, and the ways in which they communicate as vital for its existence. As such, there is a need for a better understanding of citizens' use of SNSs, and particularly whether SNSs potential is utilised in a way that generates an even deeper and wider EPS than the lighter one that already exists. Moreover, the discussion about the EPS is interconnected to the widespread controversy about the EU's alleged democratic deficit. Thus, the case of the EU, its democratic deficit and role in facilitating political participation online is discussed in the following section.

C. The Case of the European Union

This section on the case of the EU first presents considerations from previous research and theories about the Union's democratic deficit. This discussion is then followed by an outline of the EU's role in facilitating political participation online. The section concludes with an overview of the thesis' theoretical grounding points and with a defined research gap, which this thesis seeks to fill.

(1) The Democratic Deficit in the European Union

Although democracy is one of the core values of the EU, concerns are repeatedly raised regarding the lack of accountability of EU decision-makers and citizen participation in the political process. A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that 46 percent of European citizens do not trust the EU and its institutions, while 7 percent did not know whether they trust it or not (Eurobarometer, 2017). This lack of trust and non-favourable uncertainty towards the Union, held by more than half the European public, suggests that the European citizens' relation to the EU and its institutions is estranged. With this in mind, the concerns for a democratic deficit in the EU are seemingly justified.

As argued by Hix and Høyland (2011), no single definition of the democratic deficit in the EU exists. However, Weiler et al. (1995) 'standard version' of the concept is widely-used in current academic research. This definition consists of a collected set of arguments that are often posed by practitioners, media, citizens and scholars while discussing the matter. Weiler et al. original definition has been further developed by Føllesdal and Hix (2006) who argued for other elements to be added to it. As such, the current 'standard version' of the democratic deficit involves five main sets of claims that are illustrated (as by Hix and Høyland 2011, 132-133) in Table 1 below.

However, these claims are not universally accepted. Critique can be found in the arguments of the two scholars Andrew Moravcsik and Giandomenico Majone, two big names in the field of studying the EU. The main argument posed by Moravcsik and Majone is that the EU is unfairly judged against democratic ideals that are not expected even from nation states. In Majone's (2000) view, the EU is only facing a 'credibility crisis' and what the Union needs is a more transparent decision-making process. While drawing on an intergovernmental theory of EU politics, Moravcsik (2002, 2008) goes further and poses a critique against all the claims in

the 'standard version' of the democratic deficit. In his critique he states that EU policy making system is more transparent than most systems in nation states, thus there is no need for vast discussions on a democratic deficit. However, as argued by Hix and Høyland (2011), the arguments posed by these scholars are largely based on their theoretical beliefs and not sufficient to demonstrate that the EU is democratic enough. In particular, as much empirical research has indicated otherwise (Hix and Høyland 2011, 135).

Table 1. The 'standard version' of the democratic deficit

1	***Increased executive power and decreased national parliamentary control.*** Powers have shifted to actors on the European level and there has been a reduction of national parliaments' power. The main reason for this is that the European Commission is beyond the control of national parliaments. Moreover, governments can be outvoted in the Council due to qualified majority voting, or simply ignore their parliaments when making decisions in Brussels.
2	***The European Parliament is too weak.*** The citizens are no longer as well connected to Members of Parliament as to their national parliamentarians. Further, the Council still controls the European Parliament in the adoption of the budget and passing of legislation.
3	***There are no 'European elections'.*** European Parliament elections are perceived as not being about Europe, as national parties treat them as polls on their performance. European citizens are also not able to vote on EU policies, except in periodic referendums on EU treaty reforms or membership.
4	***The EU is too distant.*** It is difficult for citizens to understand the EU and the EU policy process is largely technocratic. The Council is a secretive legislature and the European Parliament is impenetrable because of the multilingual nature of the debates taking place in it.
5	***Policy drift.*** Due to all of the factors above, the policies that are adopted in the EU are not supported by a majority of citizens in most member states.

As a result of these academic discussions, several scholars have explored possible solutions for the democratic deficit and its challenges. While doing so, a higher level of participation from European citizens, a stronger European identity and the creation of a EPS are often promoted as key areas for improvement (Hobolt 2012, Michailidou 2008, Vesnic-Alujevic and Nacarino 2012).

The idea of collective identity has been commonly conceptualised in research as an element that holds a political system together. This idea, in combination with the discussion on the democratic deficit in the EU, has incited the European Commission to focus on promoting a European identity within the Union as a solution (Oshri et al. 2016, 115-116). However, research on the topic have produced contradictory results regarding the existence of such a European identity. While some argue that there is no European demos (Duchesne and Frognier 1995, Meinhof 2004), others disagree and have even produced evidence for the emergence of a European collective identity (Risse 2010). These conflicting findings most likely depend on researchers' differing measuring methods and understandings of the identity concept itself. However, in the search of solutions for the democratic deficit, the need to strengthen a European collective identity and to have a strong European demos is frequently underlined, whether one believes in its current existence or not.

Another repeatedly revisited theory in the context of finding possible solutions to the democratic deficit is the creation of a EPS. As discussed in the previous section, a strong and deliberative public sphere have been portrayed in research as a means to reach a more cohesive and participatory EU. Moreover, the deliberative aspect of democracy is particularly emphasised in research on the topic and often portrayed as significant to decrease the democratic deficit. As argued by Vesnic-Alujevic and Nacarino (2012), the construction of the European project have been successful in many ways, however there is a need for the EU to become closer to its citizens and to increase European citizens' deliberation on EU policy issues.

While considering the importance of political deliberation in the pursuit to decrease the democratic deficit, it is stimulating to place it in the context of an increasingly more digitalised Europe. This thesis rests on the idea that SNSs can, if utilised in a fruitful way, play an important role in fostering deliberation in the EU. In particular, SNSs have the structure and means to connect those European citizens that are otherwise unable to deliberate face-to-face. SNSs have the potential to strengthen the EPS and increase citizens' political participation on EU policy issues through dialogue, and in turn possibly contribute to decreasing the democratic deficit.

(2) The Role of the European Union: Facilitating Political Participation Online

While discussing online participation in the context of the EU, it is central to also consider the role that the Union plays in facilitating the arena, a EPS, for such participation. It is not possible to construct a public sphere in only a top-down manner, as it largely rests on activity from citizens (Brüggemann 2005). However, it is important to ask what the EU is doing to facilitate its existence, and in turn increase citizen participation. The Commission has for example continuously expressed a commitment to promoting dialogue with the public. The institution has recognised that public deliberation is a central factor to improve openness, transparency and participation among European citizens in the EU decision-making process (Michailidou 2008, 360). The Internet is particularly recognised as an important tool for public deliberation and as a platform for the EU's voice to reach the public directly.

In her research on the EU's communication strategy, Michailidou (2008) discovers that the actions proposed in official EU public communication documents to address the issue of its democratic deficit are focused on debate-oriented online platforms for citizen feedback. Though her research is over ten years old, it is telling that the Commission already had this focus back then. In the beginning of 2013, the European Commission also started a widespread web rationalisation project aiming to make the institution's online communication more coherent, cost-effective and relevant (European Commission 2016a). In the project, the Commission highlights the importance of digital communication:

> "People are becoming more connected and more demanding online and our organisation should make the most of these developments. To keep pace with these changes, a major cross-Commission programme of digital transformation is underway to help us rationalise, redefine and redesign how we communicate online" (European Commission 2016b).

Today, the EU institutions also have a wide-spread presence on some of the biggest SNSs. The people's assembly, the EP, are for example active on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. On Twitter, the Parliament have a news service in 24 languages including live streamed debates, articles and photo galleries. Similarly, the official Facebook page of the Parliament posts updates on EU affairs and allows followers to chat with members. On YouTube, news reports by EuroparlTV are posted regularly.

While exploring political deliberation on SNSs in a European context it is central to keep the role that the EU institutions play as a facilitator in mind. The EU is seemingly aware of the important role that SNSs can play in their communication with European citizens and is actively facilitating an arena for information access and participation. The institutions' official accounts on SNSs, for example the Twitter page of the EP, virtually brings together the actors of the Parliament and the public. On the Parliament's Facebook and Twitter pages, the information about EU affairs is made available in a top-down approach through the presentation of a topic for discussion from the Parliament's daily agenda. The attention of the public is thus directed towards a specific issue which is decided by the institution. As such, the public has the opportunity to further develop a common understanding of the topic, through sharing opinions or additional information (Țarta 2017, 150). As the analysis of this research moves forward, it will thus do so with a consideration of the role and dynamic between the official EU institutions as a strong actor and the facilitator of the arena for deliberation, and the public of European citizens as a weaker actor in return.

(3) Defining the Research Gap

As illustrated in this chapter, the majority of research on political participation on SNSs have so far been concerned with how online engagement translates into traditional offline participation. However, while rethinking participation in the digital era, it is of significance to recognise that digital environments such as SNSs hold vast democratic participatory potential in themselves. This thesis therefore seeks to move beyond the general understanding of online participation as merely a bridge or extension to its traditional offline counterpart. Instead, SNSs are viewed as an arena or public sphere in themselves, on which political deliberation can take place. Further, SNSs are understood to provide new means for participation to become clearer, and for it to transcend state and geographical boundaries.

Much of the critique that has been put forward regarding political participation online in previous research is not as evident in the European societies. Surprisingly, little research has however so far been concerned with the role of SNSs for increasing participation in European politics. SNSs potential for increasing citizens' participation, and for such participation to transcend national borders, is particularly interesting to consider in the case of the EU and its democratic deficit. The question is no longer whether the European public is active on SNSs or if these sites hold potential as a digital EPS for political participation. Rather, this thesis seeks

to further explore *how* this potential is actually utilised by the public of European citizens that are active on these sites. This thesis is focused on more general day-to-day political participation, as the current limited understanding of how citizens use SNSs is based on works that analyse participation in an electoral or social movement context. Further, research on the digital public sphere has, alike works on online participation, largely overshadowed the public itself and has mainly been focused on the digital architecture of SNSs. Thus, this thesis will contribute with a deeper actor-focused investigation of the digital EPS, focusing on European citizens' deliberation online.

IV. Aim of the Thesis

The discussion on previous literature and the thesis' theoretical considerations have provided a comprehensive overview of current and relevant topics within the field of European studies. It has become evident that the digital structure of SNSs hold vast democratic value as it has increased the possibility for the public of European citizens to participate on EU policy issues through cross-border deliberation. One may even speak of SNSs as a potential digital EPS. At the same time, a gap in the academic research has been identified, as no approach in the works on these topics has thus far put forward an empirical actor-focused analysis of how the public of European citizens are truly utilising this potential. This thesis sets out to address these shortcomings in existing research. Its overall aim is to investigate the digital EPS and the public of European citizens' participation in European politics through SNSs.

The thesis considers European citizens as the driving force of the EPS and thus takes an approach that is actor-focused. The thesis will analyse political participation in the form of deliberation as online communication on SNSs between European citizens and the EU institutions. Accordingly, the thesis poses the following question:

> *"In what ways do the public of European citizens make use of social networking sites as a digital European public sphere for political deliberation on EU policy issues?"*

In order to approach this question in a fruitful manner, three sub-questions are formulated accordingly:

   I. In what ways do the public of European citizens participate politically on EU policy issues through online deliberation on social networking sites?

   II. What are the public of European citizens discussing during such participation?

   III. In what ways do the public of European citizens display a belonging to a European Community during such participation?

To answer the question that guides the concern of this thesis, an analytical framework is applied to the public of European citizens' communication on the EP's official Twitter page. This is largely based on Țarta's (2017, 151) framework, originally created for evaluating the European public on Facebook. It further draws on the thesis' key theoretical considerations on political participation and public sphere theory (Habermas 1989). Through application of the analytical framework, its five criteria and respective indicators, the thesis will be able to examine the discursive tendencies and capacities of the European public.

The criteria allows for analysis of the most central ways offered by SNSs in which the public of European citizens can participate through online deliberation. It will for example show if the public make use of Twitter's potential to be a public sphere for critical debate and evaluation of the EU, or if the public respond to each other's comments and thus utilise the potential to carry out discussions horizontally. It also takes into account whether the public self-identify as part of the European Community or a national collective, which in turn can shed further light on the utilisation of Twitter as a digital EPS. A more extensive presentation of the analytical framework and its criteria can be found in Chapter V.

A main finding that is expected to derive from the analysis is that *the European public has a strong critical function,* as SNSs are likely to mainly be utilised by the public as a digital EPS for easy critique of the EU. Twitter has in previous research proven to be a platform for dialogue between citizens and decision-makers (Sørensen 2016). However, as argued in Chapter III, the European citizens' relation to the EU and its institutions is today estranged. It is thus likely that most of this dialogue will have a critical tone. On the other hand, Chapter III also highlighted strong institutional interference on SNSs as a problem for the existence of a digital public sphere. The awareness of the institutional presence can make citizens alter their behaviour to become more appropriate and therefore less critical. The EP also oversees the Twitter page and

there is a possibility that comments with critical content will be removed by the Parliament. This could in turn affect the thesis' findings in regard to the public's critical function. Therefore, the role of the EP as an actor that facilitates the online platform has been addressed in the theoretical foundation and will be considered throughout the thesis.

The case that is empirically analysed in this thesis is one which brings together the EP as a decision-making actor and the public of European citizens. Through examination of the European public's political deliberation on SNSs, the thesis will develop the current academic understanding of the digital EPS and the European public's participation in European politics. As such, answers to the study's research question could further address the growing concerns of the European citizens' declining participation in its traditional offline form.

V. Methodology and Data Selection

This chapter is divided into three sections, outlining the thesis' methodological approach. First, the data selection is presented with reflections on the scientific relevance of gathering data through Twitter and the thesis' sampling process. In the second section, the thesis' methodological approach - a qualitative content analysis is presented. The coding process and framework for evaluating the public on Twitter is further illustrated. The third section concludes with a discussion on the limitations, generalisability, reliability and validity of the thesis.

A. Data Selection

This section outlines details and considerations regarding the thesis' data selection. The thesis will be based on textual data in the form of social media content, collected from the EP's official Twitter account. First, the significance of data collected through SNSs for the purpose of academic research within the social sciences is discussed. This is followed by an overview of Twitter and its digital structure. The section concludes with a discussion on the sampling process from the official Twitter page of the EP.

(1) Data Collection Through Twitter

In the aftermath of the uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East in 2011, popularised as the Arab Spring, SNSs began to be viewed as a critical political tool and to be taken more serious in academic research (Bjola and Jiang 2015, 72). The central role that SNSs played in the uprisings to mobilise social and political activism against repressive regimes has

encouraged an increasing number of researchers to examine the political potential of the sites. Further, to gather data from SNSs, rather than through for example more traditional collection techniques like interviews, allows for analysis of social data on a substantial scale and for collection over short periods of time. It has proven particularly useful for researchers that seek to better understand social relationships and behaviours of the public, as is the case in this thesis.

One of the most popular SNSs for research purposes is the microblogging service and social network Twitter. As argued by Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013), Twitter constitute as a great source of research data and is viewed as an ideal platform for sharing information and political opinions publicly. Political institutions, for example political parties and political foundations, are increasingly using Twitter for public political discussions and to carry out direct dialogues with citizens (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013, 1277). Since Twitter was first released in 2006 it has grown greatly in size and today the site attracts over 300 million active users each month. The network is centred around a microblogging feature which allow users to post 280 character long posts or so called 'Tweets'. The user also has the ability to attach an image, video, location or poll to their post. Moreover, like most SNSs, Twitter is based on the principle of followers. As a user decides to follow another account, the other account's Tweets will be displayed in a reverse chronological order.

Further, a user can engage on the site through a re-post of content from another account in a 'Retweet'. This action is often displayed as an endorsement to what was said in the original Tweet. It is also common for users to include hashtags '#' in their posts as a way to make it searchable or connect it to a certain topic. Hashtags are often used as a way to engage more people in the discussion of a post and to particularly trigger participation among people who do not yet follow one's Twitter page, yet may follow a hashtag due to an interest in a specific issue. In a similar way, the '@' symbol followed by another user's name on Twitter is a way to mention or reply to the user in question. An overview of main usage conventions on Twitter (as by Jungherr 2015, 13) is illustrated in Table 2 below.

As argued by Jungherr (2015) on the significance of collecting data through Twitter, researchers have over time become "…increasingly interested in data that document users' interactions on online platforms. Each action a user takes on an online service leaves digital data traces. These data are highly interesting as they go well beyond the breadth and detail to which social scientists are accustomed..." (Jungherr 2015,11). Moreover, as this thesis is particularly aimed at investigating the digital EPS and the European public's participation in

European politics through SNSs, Twitter constitutes as a highly relevant source for its data collection.

Table 2. Usage conventions on Twitter

Usage Convention	Description
@reply to another user	Used to publicly address other Twitter users. One precedes the text of a message with the username of the addressee and an @ (i.e. @username).
@mention of another user	The @username convention can also be used in the text of a message instead of the beginning, this is called an @mention.
Retweet	A retweet is an exact copy quote of another tweet.
Modified Retweet	A retweet that is modified by the person who is re-posting it.
#keyword	One can use keywords preceded by the hashtag '#' symbol to establish an explicit context for a tweet.

(2) The Official Twitter Page of the European Parliament: The Sampling Process

The analysis of this thesis is based on textual data in the form of social media content, collected from the EP's official Twitter account. As argued above, the data selection was made with the understanding that Twitter is a relatively unexplored, however rich, data resource for social sciences, particularly within the field of European studies. It further allows for a large enough and real-time dataset to be gathered in order to answer the research question of this thesis. As the EP has several Twitter accounts in 24 European languages, a delimitation was made to only include page posts from the Parliament's official account in English.

A first overview of the EP's official Twitter page showed that it has over 444,000 followers and around 18,000 Tweets. The main tool that is used by the Parliament to communicate is the Tweets, which are featured in the news feed of all their followers, unless they have actively chosen not to receive such posts from the EP's page. The Tweets that are created by the Parliament consist of just words or words in combination with a link, picture or a video. Some Tweets containing only an infographic, image or video are also posted.

The Tweets on the EP's Twitter page are available from April 2009 up until the current date and on average contains around 10-40 comments. Thus, to delimit the number of page posts and respective comments that will be included in the sample, two Tweets on key EU policy issues from each month during the period January, 1 2017 and December 31, 2017 will be selected. This selection will add up to approximately 700 comments, and thus a large enough dataset for the scope and analytical purpose of this thesis. The chosen months will also portray what a recent and typical year of social media engagement on Twitter looks like for the European public and the EP.

The initial review of the Twitter page further showed that a broad variety of both societal and political topics are covered in the Tweets that the Parliament posts. The Tweets are often related to EU policy such as waste management, unemployment, transportation or equality. Information about events and dialogues that are hosted by the Parliament are also commonly featured in posts. Further, 'lighter topics' such as the recognition of the World Health Day or infographics of positive things that the EU is currently doing for its citizens appears to function as dividers on the Twitter page. In this way, the Parliament can reach a larger audience and as a result a wider group of participants that are interested in the bigger scope of public issues, rather than specific political ones. The page also includes few Retweeted posts that was first written by other users such as the President of the EP Antonio Tajani or the European Commission. However, as the focus of the analysis is on the communication between the EP and the public, posts that are Retweeted will not be included in the sample of data.

The preliminary analysis of the Twitter page further displayed that posts often were written in a way that calls for action from its reader. For example through questions such as 'How is money from the #EUbudget invested in your country? Check out our updated interactive infographic'. These Tweets are likely created in a way that is thought to trigger discussion and participation among its readers. Hashtags are, when used, primarily EU related hashtags, such as #FutureofEurope or #EUbudget.

As mentioned, the sample includes two page posts on key EU policy issues from each month during the year of 2017. The two posts from each month will be chosen on a basis of three main criteria. The posts have to be: 1) based around a key EU policy issue, for example environmental policy, migration, Brexit or the European single market, 2) originally posted by the EP's official account and thus not be a Retweet by another account, and 3) based on text, or as a minimum be a combination of text and image or text and video. The Tweets from each month will be

tested against these three criteria. To then refine the scope further, the posts that fulfil the criteria will be analysed in order to select the two with the highest number of comments. These two Tweets from each month will be included in the thesis' sample and their comments will be analysed with the framework presented in the next chapter.

B. Qualitative Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis with a directed approach will be used as the thesis' research method. First, this section outline details regarding the chosen method, followed by considerations on the coding process and the directed approach to content analysis. Further, the coding framework, drawing on the thesis' theoretical foundations and Țarta's (2017) framework for evaluation of the public on Facebook, is presented with its criteria for evaluating the European public on Twitter.

(1) The Coding Process: A Directed Approach to Content Analysis

Content analysis is commonly used within qualitative research as it is regarded a flexible method for the study of textual data. The method has a focus on the characteristics of language as communication and underlines the contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). The qualitative content analysis allows for mapping and interpreting meaning and intentions in textual data, making it an advantageous method for empirically analysing content from SNSs. Further, for this type of research it is beneficial to carry out a qualitative content analysis, rather than a quantitative one. As argued by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), "qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). The coding process that will be used for organisation and analysis of the social media content is inspired by a directed approach to content analysis (as by Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The directed content analysis has a structured process and is particularly advantageous for this thesis as it offers a chance to draw on existing theory.

The first step in the analytical process is to, guided by existing theory and academic research, identify key concepts as coding categories. The thesis' coding scheme is based on main- and subcategories. The main categories reflect the most significant aspects of the data, i.e. what the

thesis is most concerned to find more information about. Further, the subcategories specify what is said in the data in connection to the main categories.

Public sphere theory and previous research (Țarta 2017) will be reviewed and used to develop the initial coding scheme before organisation and analysis of the data takes place. Once the coding scheme has been established, a first 'coding test' of two randomly selected page posts and their comments from the Parliament's Twitter page will be carried out. This is done to delimit the chance of the coding scheme having to be refined during a later stage of the analytical process and to strengthen the thesis' validity. After the 'coding test', the initial coding scheme will be revised if needed. A peer-review of the coding framework will also be carried out in its initial phase to strengthen its validity further. Coding of selected page posts and comments from the EP's official Twitter account will then begin directly, based on the predetermined codes. The coded data will be analysed and discussed to increase the understanding of the digital EPS and the public of European citizens' participation in European politics online.

(2) Coding Framework: Criteria for Evaluating the Public on Twitter

The analytical framework that will be used as a coding scheme for organisation and analysis of the dataset is largely based on Țarta's (2017, 151) framework for evaluation of the public on Facebook. As argued by Țarta (2017), the "…framework is designed to evaluate the European social media public through a content analysis, according to the theoretical assumption that the public becomes visible through the dissemination of content, and can be evaluated in terms of democratic potential…and the discursive capacities…" Țarta (2017, 150). The thesis' coding framework further draws on the its key theoretical considerations on political participation and public sphere theory (Habermas 1989). As such, two of Țarta's main categories, *Visibility* and *Identity*, have been altered. More specified indicators for analysing the European public's identity and visibility were added so that the framework in this thesis also includes the profile information, self-identification as part of the European Community, self-identification as part of a national collective, and language as indicators.

The developed framework and its criteria will in a fruitful manner help answer the question that guides the concern of this thesis, as well as its three sub-questions. Conclusions regarding sub-question I can be drawn from application of all five categories in the framework. Sub-

question II is primarily to be answered by the *Attention* category and its indication concerned with the public's focus on topic. Further, sub-question III can be answered by application of the indicators in the *Identity* category. An overview of the thesis' coding scheme and its criteria for evaluating the European public on Twitter can be viewed in Table 3. Following the table, the main categories of the coding scheme are developed with an explanation and description of their respective indicators.

Table 3. Criteria for evaluating the European public on Twitter

The Public	Indicators
Visibility	Usernames Profile information
Identity	Self-identification as part of the European Community Self-identification as part of a national collective Language
Attention	Duration of discussion Focus on topic Acknowledging comments by others
Discursive Capacity	Justifications of opinions Responding to comments by others Contributing to discussion through information sharing
Critical Function	Evaluating decision-makers Questioning decision-makers Identifying solutions

The public's visibility

The public cannot upload their own content to the EP's official Twitter page, apart from commenting or responding to the Tweets created by the Parliament itself. As such, the public becomes *visible* by reacting to the updates on the page (Țarta 2017, 152). Therefore, this thesis will analyse the public's visibility to the extent that it is possible to deduct such information from the account's username and profile information. It will note whether a comment was posted by an individual user or a collective account, for example a fan page, group or organisation. Further, it will also examine how anonymous users' decide to be while commenting on the EP's Twitter by investigating whether they use their full names or not.

The public's identity

The public's *identity* is also of interest for the thesis' aim and analysis. It will be noted whether the users identify themselves as part of the European Community or as part of a national collective. Țarta gives the following example of a comment with a clear identity statement: 'I will not forgive you, EP, for what you did to us in Italy'. On the other hand, to simply use Italy as an example for an opinion is not a clear identity statement (Țarta 2017, 161). Another indicator for the public's identity will also be used. This indicator is the language in which the comments are posted. Comments that are written in other languages than English, the main language of the Twitter page, will be taken into consideration as a different form of self-identification to a national collective. For users to read the Parliament's posts in English, but then decide to respond in their own language could be seen as indirect favouring of a national culture.

The public's attention

As there is a constant flow of information and posts on the Twitter page it is of interest to further examine the public's *attention* span. The public's attention will be analysed through three indicators; the duration of the discussion in the comment section on the post, the users' focus on the original post's topic, and the ways in which users are acknowledging comments by others. These indicators allow for further conclusions to be drawn about the public's utilisation of the network's potential and the quality of the political discussions on the Twitter page. If users show a preference to rather comment on the set topic of the post, than diverge to other topics, it can for example show that discussions on the Parliament's Twitter page are focused around European politics and potentially enriched through each comment (Țarta 2017, 157). The analysis of the three indicators for the public's attention is also a first step towards evaluating its discursive capacity.

The public's discursive capacity

Another aspect of the public that will be examined is its *discursive capacity*. It will be analysed through three indicators; users' justifications of opinions, responsiveness to comments by others, and contribution to discussion through information sharing. The comments that offer justification or reason for their opinions is one of the main indicators of discursivity and thus an important aspect of the public's deliberative practices to consider. As such, the thesis will investigate if a stated opinion is presented on clear grounds. Justification of a comment may for

example be; in objective knowledge (for example statistics or books), political or economic arguments, deductive reasoning, personal experience, or universal principles of common good (for example human rights) (Țarta 2017, 155). Moreover, the users' responsiveness to comments by others allows for further conclusions to be drawn about the usage of the site and the quality of the political deliberation. In the analysis, the users' responsiveness will be examined through the extent to which users either directly respond to or mention previous comments on the post.

The public's capacity to share new information, which in turn can lead to an overall deepened understanding of the discussed topic, also plays a key role for the analysis of its discursive practices and the digital public sphere. Particularly, as the digital structure of SNSs, in contrast to offline modes of participation, allows for a new sort of participation through adding a clear link to other sources. In the analysis of the public's discursive capacity, it will therefore be noted if and how users utilise this potential to include a link or additional information in their comments to share new information.

The public's critical function

The *critical function* of the public is one of the cornerstones of the public sphere and thus a central aspect to consider in the thesis' analysis. The democratic value of the public sphere, also in this thesis' explored case of a digital EPS, arguably rests on its ability to create a platform for critical debate. Therefore, the public's critical function will be analysed through three indicators; users' evaluation of decision-makers, questioning of decision-makers, and identification of solutions. It is fundamental for a EPS and high quality political deliberation to include a critical function of the public. Thus, the thesis will review if people are making use of Twitter to identify problems in the political system. It is further interesting to note if this critique is followed with posed solutions for the problem in question, and the quality of those solutions. If the critique is followed by suggested solutions it shows an even more deliberative capacity of the public and thus a more developed digital public sphere.

C. The Thesis' Limitations, Generalisability, Reliability and Validity

This thesis' contribution to existing research, theoretical debates and the importance of its topic for the field of European Studies have already been outlined in the previous chapters. To further ensure the thesis' quality, it is also of significance to discuss its limitations, generalisability, reliability and validity. The thesis' main concern is to analyse how the public of European citizens make use of SNSs as a digital EPS for political deliberation on EU policy issues. To do so in a fruitful manner, the thesis delimited the scope of the research to Twitter and the EP's account on the site.

It may arguably have been interesting in regard to the thesis' aim to investigate other EU institutions and SNSs, or to compare several accounts from different institutions or sites. However, the focus on Twitter and the EP is considered the most appropriate for the stated aim of this thesis. Twitter has been largely overlooked in prior research on the topic so far and is broadly perceived as a more serious and text-based site than for example Facebook. It is a suitable and data-rich source for a qualitative content analysis. The thesis' focus on the EP is largely due to its role as a decision-making actor, making it closer to the European public than most other EU institutions.

Answers to the thesis' research question could address the growing concerns of the European citizens' declining participation in its traditional offline form. Yet, the thesis' findings can only be viewed as a preliminary step to understanding how the public of European citizens utilise the potential of SNSs, and there is little room for generalisability beyond the investigated case. Arguably, the thesis' result is still more generalisable than the limited qualitative existing research on the topic. Though, the thesis is not concerned with analysing the European public's political deliberation on other SNSs than Twitter, it can indicate aspects of deliberation on for example Facebook. Moreover, the thesis dataset is based on posts from the Parliament's Twitter page that spans throughout a full year and is therefore not fixed to a single policy issue or context. Prior research has limited the scope of data to only include for example the time of elections, which in turn allowed for even less generalisability than in the explored case of this thesis.

Furthermore, the thesis' data is only gathered from the Parliament's English Twitter account. As there are 24 languages available for following the Parliament on Twitter, there is unexplored and potentially interesting data that was not accounted for in this thesis. The delimitation to

only focus on the English account was made on the basis of this being one of the main official languages of the EU. The page is also the one with the largest following on Twitter out of all 24 accounts, and is therefore considered to hold the largest potential for deliberation.

Further, there are limitations to the qualitative content analysis as a research method. In particular, in regard to the creation and application of the coding scheme. To avoid that selection bias becomes an issue for the validity of the thesis' results, the coding scheme was critically reviewed by peers at the university and largely grounded in the thesis' theoretical foundations. Alternatively, other qualitative research methods for textual analysis, such as discourse analysis, could be used for this type of study. However, the content analysis is understood to be a more appropriate method for gathering and analysing data as it allows for a better organisation of large quantities of text into fewer relevant content categories.

To collect and qualitatively analyse textual data from SNSs can also, compared to other data sources and methods, strengthen the reliability of the thesis. As argued by Silverman (2014), "when you are dealing with a text (e.g. an Internet site) the data are already available, unfiltered through the researcher's field notes. For this reason, textual data are, in principle, more reliable than observations" (Silverman 2014, 87). Silverman also notes two ways to satisfy reliability criteria in non-quantitative work which this thesis has taken into consideration. First, the research process has been made transparent in the thesis through clear descriptions of the research strategy, data collection and methods for analysis. Second, the thesis has paid attention to theoretical transparency "…by making explicit the theoretical stance from which the interpretation takes place and showing how this produces particular interpretations and exclude others" (Silverman 2014, 84).

The thesis validity has been strengthened through continuous critical review throughout the research process by the supervisor and peers. All the choices and refinements made regarding methodology, data and the thesis' theoretical foundation have been communicated and discussed. The thesis' validity has also been strengthened by its grounding in previous academic works and its clear and continuous discussion regarding the contribution to existing research, theoretical debates and the importance of its topic for the field of European Studies.

VI. Analysis

This chapter outlines the result from the qualitative content analysis of the data collected from the EP's official Twitter account. The two analysed posts from each month of 2017 were based on key EU policy issues such as migration, environment, trade and Brexit. The results are presented and analysed in a thematic fashion based on the main categories from the coding scheme. Thus, the chapter includes the following sections; A) The public's visibility, B) The public's identity, C) The public's attention, D) The public's discursive capacity, E) The public's critical function. Under each section, the Parliament's Tweets and their respective comments are illustrated through figures and discussed on the basis of the thesis' aim, research question, theoretical foundations and coding scheme.

A. The Public's Visibility

The first category considered the public's visibility. As argued in Chapter V, the public of European citizens become visible by reacting to the updates on the Twitter page. Thus, the visibility has been analysed to the extent that it has been possible to deduct such information from an account's username and profile information. It was primarily noted whether a comment was posted by an individual user or a collective account. The analysis showed that most of the comments that were posted on the EP's Tweets came from individual accounts and that the first and last name of the users were fully displayed in the majority of these comments. It is a sign of a well-functioning digital public sphere that most users decided to be associated with their full names in the discussions. As users write comments under a full name, it gives a clearer sense of identification and subsequently increases the public's visibility during the participation.

As argued in Chapter III, a main critique against SNSs deliberative potential as a digital public sphere in previous research is that the institutional influence is too strong due to surveillance (Kruse et al. 2017, Marwick 2012, Trottier 2011). The argument underlines that surveillance on SNSs can make citizens alter their behaviour to become more appropriate, or even drive them to be anonymous online. However, this thesis' findings indicate that users feel comfortable enough while participating to do so with their full names. If users felt observed by surveillance online to such an extent that is argued for in the critique posed by these previous works, the results of this thesis would arguably not have shown such a strong individual visibility of the public.

Those few users who did not have a full name displayed often posted comments under a first name or a nickname. The nicknames made the users more anonymous and consisted of random combinations of words or political statements. An example of a comment posted by a user with a politicised and anonymous nickname is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Example of comment by user with politicised and anonymous nickname
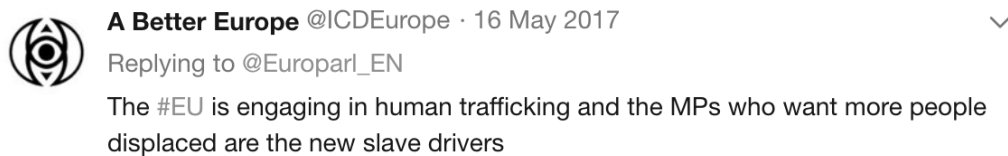
The few collective accounts that commented on the analysed Tweets were often smaller and politically driven accounts such as 'Nexit News' in Figure 2 below. An increased presence of other actors or collective accounts could deepen the discussions on the Twitter page, and subsequently contribute to the digital public sphere with more perspectives and information. As argued in Chapter III on Habermas' (1989) theory, the public sphere can be strengthened if the public have unlimited access to information. However, little is seemingly done by the EP to include more actors and collective accounts who could possibly share information in the discussion. For example, the Parliament only Retweets posts made by accounts that are strongly associated with themselves, such as the president of the Parliament Antonio Tajani. Similarly, there are no @mentions of users, apart from the EU institutions. As such, the Parliament does not necessarily encourage other collective accounts to enter the discussion. In turn, there are also few attempts made by the public commenting on the Parliament's Tweets to grab the attention of other collective accounts through for example @mention.

Figure 2. Example of comment by collective account

The analysis further showed how some of the Parliament's Tweets, such as the ones on environmental topics, only had comments by individual accounts with their full names showing. It was seemingly less need for users to stay anonymous on topics and discussions on for example Glyphosate, while Tweets centred around migration or Brexit had a larger number of comments by individual users with more anonymous nicknames. The topic of the analysed
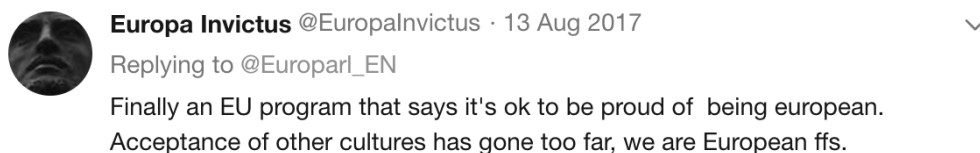
Tweet seemingly played a vast role for the public's visibility. Moreover, though it was not part of the formal analysis, it became clear that those who have a personal connection to the discussed topic are more likely to comment on it. For example, the investigation of the Parliament's Tweets on Brexit showed that it was mainly users with a connection to the UK and Ireland who posted comments.

B. The Public's Identity

The second category considered the public's identity. With the thesis' aim and guiding research question in mind, the analysis focused on whether the public displayed a belonging to a EPS or European Community. Most of the comments did not include a clear identity statement. However, those users who did state their identity more often did so as Europeans, rather than as part of a national collective.

As many users did not include a clear identity statement in their comments, it is difficult to fully draw conclusions regarding the extent to which one can speak of a digital EPS. Arguably, if users had posted more clear identity statements it would have been easier to see if the public had a tendency to identify as Europeans or as part of a national collective during their participation. On one hand, it is a positive indication for the existence of a digital EPS that those users who did state their identity more often did so as Europeans. On the other side, the number of people who did so were not enough in order to draw conclusions regarding whether the European public make use of Twitter as a digital EPS. Two examples of comments with a clear self-identification as part of the European community and a national collective is shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 respectively.

Figure 3. Example of comment with self-identification as European

Europa Invictus @EuropaInvictus · 13 Aug 2017
Replying to @Europarl_EN
Finally an EU program that says it's ok to be proud of being european.
Acceptance of other cultures has gone too far, we are European ffs.

Figure 4. Example of comment with self-identification as part of a national collective

Krzysztof Wrobel @krzyszto7wrobel · 18 May 2017
Replying to @Europarl_EN
1- rationally buy food, 2 - Create simple recipes to make excess food shops could transmit to poor people for free.Good luck from Poland🖤⬛

The analysis further showed that those who self-identified as part of the European Community often did so in a negative way and was not pleased to consider themselves European. An example of such an identity statement is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Example of comment with negative self-identification as European

> **Sara** @marm_sar · 9 Nov 2017
> Replying to @Europarl_EN
> What about Catalonia? Remaining silent when 4 more politicians went to prison is wrong!!!!!!!!! So upset an si disgusted to be European

Though users displayed much discontent to be European it should not necessarily be interpreted as a negative result for the utilisation of Twitter as a digital EPS. It may be favourable for the EPS if the public of European citizens identify themselves as part of the European Community in a more positive sense, particularly in the context of a EPS as a solution for the democratic deficit. However, the reality of the EPS is not as one-dimensional. Arguably, the Euroscepticism even worked as a sort of unifier of the digital European public.

This phenomenon has also been highlighted in a few more specified recent works on the topic. For example, Clay (2011) argues that "a public sphere is more likely to emerge in a society as a result of peoples' dissatisfaction with matters of economics or day-to-day governance than from their embrace of abstract political ideals" (Clay 2011, 32). In line with this idea, Segesten and Bossetta (2017b) confirmed the claim that Euroscepticism can contribute to the Europeanisation of national public spheres. In a comparative analysis of Sweden and Denmark the authors examined public discourse on the day after the 2014 European Parliamentary elections across print media, Twitter and Facebook. The results of their study suggested that the public's Eurosceptic contestation of the EU may have an unintended impact on national media debates, giving them a stronger European dimension. Segesten and Bossetta further notes that their study "…warrants moderate optimism for the Europeanization potential of social media vis-a-vis traditional media structures: Print media was more Europeanized in scope, whereas social media publics were more aligned in their sentiment toward Euroscepticism" (Segesten and Bossetta 2017b, 1).

Another indicator used to analyse the public's identity was the language in which the comments were posted. As argued in Chapter V, comments that are written in languages other than English, the main language of the Twitter page, could be considered as a different form of self-identification to a national collective. To write in one's own language was more common

among the commentators than to make a clear identity statement. Apart from English, comments were sometimes posted in other large official languages of the EU, such as German, French or Spanish. As these users have first read and understood the Parliament's Tweet in English and then decided to respond in their own language, it can be understood as indirect favouring of their national culture and identity. Yet, this indication of self-identification with a national collective is arguably more abstract than making a clear written statement of identity. It was also common practice to use countries as examples or as a way to prove a point in the comments. Similarly to the analysis of the first category, the public's visibility, the topic of the Parliament's Tweet often set the tone for which countries were used as an example in the comments. However, as argued in Chapter V, to simply use countries as examples to prove a point should not be considered equal to making a clear identity statement.

C. The Public's Attention

The third category considered the public's attention. The three indicators used in the category were the duration of the discussion in the comment section on the post, the users' focus on the original post's topic, and the ways in which users were acknowledging comments by others. The analysis of the discussions' duration showed that it was common for discussions to last for about one day, and in rare cases users kept commenting on a Tweet for two or three days after it was first posted. Though the one day duration of the discussions may seem short at first, it needs to be considered in the context of the fast-communication nature of SNSs that were highlighted in Chapters III and V. It is this nature, SNSs potential to make political participation quick, interesting and accessible for citizens, that made researchers consider SNSs as a digital public sphere in the first place.

As such, for these discussions to last one to three days is arguably longer than expected for political deliberation on SNSs. Particularly in the case of the EP's Twitter page, on which the public is continuously provided with new Tweets and discussion topics. The Twitter page is constantly updated with two to four Tweets every day and each of the Parliament's posts still contained about 10-40 comments. In regard to this finding, the public seemingly make use of Twitter in an engaged manner through longer and deeper deliberative discussions.

The public's focus on the original topics of the Parliament's Tweets is of particular interest for answering the second sub-question concerning what the public is discussing while participating politically on SNSs. The finding suggests that the public has a preference to rather comment on the set EU topic of the post, than diverge to other matters. This is an indication that the discussions on the Parliament's Twitter page are EU focused and potentially enriched through each comment. It was further noted that comments which did not stick to the original topic of the Tweet still had a relevant connection to the EU in general, or other key EU policy issues. For example, if the original post concerned digitalisation and roaming charges it could bring up topics such as Brexit in the comments. Users would for example question what happens with roaming charges for people in the UK after Brexit, resulting in other users discussing various aspects of Brexit. Thus, even in those situations comments stayed within the realm of EU policy.

In Chapter III, the EPS was conceptualised in three ways (as by Gripsrud 2007) and one of these argued that "the European public sphere is a pluralistic ensemble of issue-oriented publics that exists once the same issues are discussed simultaneously and within a shared frame of relevance…" (Gripsrud 2007, 483). As this analysis has indicated, the European public gathers through online deliberation around the same issues. The public mainly discusses the EU policy decided by the EP and other EU related topics that may simultaneously arise. Thus, at least in regard to this conceptualisation, one can speak of the EP's Twitter as something that resembles a digital EPS. Comments that deviated from a Tweet's original topic were also often still related to larger societal events that were happening in Europe at the time.

The public's significant focus on the Tweet's topic is exemplified in Figure 6. The comment in the figure is a response to the EP's Tweet on the asylum system posted on November 16, 2017 reading: "Parliament ready to start talks on reforming EU asylum system to ensure all countries take responsibility. Urges @EUCouncil to come to the negotiating table #EPlenary".

Figure 6. Example of comment focusing on topic

DashMad @Dashka59171291 · 16 Nov 2017

Replying to @Europarl_EN @EUCouncil

On reforming EU asylym system which way exactly? To let in millions and millions of people who don't share European culture and values? Do you have people's mandate for this?

It should also be highlighted that the public was often encouraged in the wording of the Parliament's Tweets to react to statements, share their opinions or answer questions on the Tweet's central policy issue. This further indicates that the Parliament may have the ability to strengthen the public's focus on a topic. This ability of the EP could be further applied in the context of the other categories in the coding scheme. For example, it supports the idea that was noted in the section on the public's visibility regarding the Parliament being able to do more than currently is the case to deepen the digital EPS. As argued in Chapter III, it is not possible to construct a public sphere in only a top-down manner, as it largely rests on activity from citizens. However, it is important to ask what the EU is doing to facilitate its existence and subsequently to increase participation.

The public also largely acknowledged previous comments by others made on the Tweets and it became clear that the first comment had a tendency to set the tone of deliberation. An example of this is illustrated by the two comments in Figure 7. The first comment by user @GillStella was one of the first responses to a Tweet on human rights. A few comments later on the same post, several users such as @SebWrites displayed an acknowledgement of this previous comment and continued a discussion on Catalans.

Figure 7. Example of acknowledgement of other users' comments

Gill Stella @GillStella · 10 Dec 2017
Replying to @Europarl_EN
The EU shows it does not respect its own Human Rights Statutes i.e. freedom of expression, democratic values but above all, tolerance, by allowing Spain to keep honest Catalans in prison or exile; citizens who have harmed no-one & yet @EU_Commission remains acquiescent! @KRLS @ft

Sebastian White @SebWrites · 10 Dec 2017
Replying to @Europarl_EN
Then you did "nothing" in respect of #Catalan & #Syria.

& yet you supported an illegitimate election in #Egypt, when people in Egypt fought with their 'lives' in Tahrir Square!

Have "any" of 'you' done anything so brave?

& yet you couldn't even get that right!

Speak Truth!!!

While commenting on the EP's Tweets, users could easily choose to not read comments that were previously posted by others. There is a risk for dialogue to only take place vertically between the European public and the EP, and not horizontally between the public themselves. However, the analysis indicated that the public participates with a high level of attention to previous comments by others. Furthermore, the public's tendency to stay on the topic of the Tweets also shows that the discussions truly are centred around EU policy. As such, the analysis of this third category concludes that the European public utilises the Twitter page for inclusive deliberation by showing a noteworthy level of attention during their discussions. This is an encouraging find for the digital EPS because, as argued in Chapter III, the public sphere should be a realm in which individuals gathers to participate in open discussions with each other.

D. The Public's Discursive Capacity

The fourth category examined the public's discursive capacity. It was analysed through three indicators; the users' justification of opinions, responsiveness to comments by others, and contribution to discussion through information sharing. First, the analysis showed that it was common for users to justify their opinions. The comments were mainly grounded through references to personal experiences, universal principles of common good, as well as political or economic arguments.

As highlighted in Chapter V, to investigate if and how users justify their opinions is central for drawing conclusions regarding the public's discursive practices. For users to simply post statements without grounds is not negative per se, as a discussion is still taking place. However, if the public also shares the basis of their arguments it increases the deliberative quality of the overall discussion as it contributes to the understanding of each other's opinions. As this understanding is extended, it may further increase the public's knowledge of the discussed EU policy topics and result in a more deepened digital EPS. In particular, as the ways in which the users justified their opinions varied from personal experiences to political arguments. This indirect contribution to the discussion that was made by the public's inclusion of the basis of their opinions, could also potentially inspire more participation on SNSs among the European public. If users perceive the deliberative quality of the discussions as higher, more people may see the value in joining the discussions on EU policy on these sites and extend the digital EPS further.

In the previous section it was discussed whether users acknowledged each other's comments. This category is instead concerned with users' *responsiveness* to comments by others. Investigating the public's responsiveness deepens the analysis and allows for further conclusions to be drawn about the quality of the political deliberation. The users' responsiveness was studied through the ways in which comments either directly responded to or mentioned previous comments on the post. The analysis showed that there were many direct responses in the comment section of the EP's Tweets. These comments also more often than not developed into a discussion thread of six or seven comments by the same two or three users. The public also made several @name mentions to highlight or answer previous comments.

The responsiveness found in the comment section of the Parliament's Tweets further shows how the public is utilising the potential of SNSs as a digital public sphere through horizontal discussions. In contrast to public deliberation in its more traditional offline form, the deliberation on SNSs such as Twitter allows for users to respond to each other's comments in a clear and inclusive way. It is thus encouraging that the analysis found a strong tendency among the European public to make use of this potential, both by directly responding to or mentioning previous comments made by other users.

The public's capacity to share new information, which in turn can lead to a more developed understanding of a discussed topic, also played a key role as an indicator for the public's discursive capacity during the analysis. Due to the structure of Twitter there is much potential for added democratic value to the digital public sphere through information sharing. Twitter allows users to add a link or other material in their comments as an easy way to share information with each other during the discussions. As such, in this analysis of the public's discursive capacity it was noted if and how users included a link or additional information in their comments to share new information.

Many comments were informative in the sense that they contributed with opinions to the topic. However, the analysis of the data showed little tendency among the public to utilise the potential to share information through links or other material. This indicates a limitation to the European public's discursive capacity, which in turn lowers the quality of the overall deliberation on the EP's Twitter. Nonetheless, the few users who actually shared information did so by linking to larger news sites or statistics. For example, Figure 8 illustrates how a user contributed to the discussion on Glyphosate through sharing an infographic with a clearly stated source.

Figure 8. Example of information sharing

In a few identified cases users both justified their opinions and contributed to the discussion through information sharing. As is illustrated in Figure 9, one comment both referred to Glyphosate being unscientific as it will not improve health, while also attaching an article from Forbes on the topic. In this example the user is also questioning the EP and thus indicates a critical function, which is analysed more in-depth in section E of this chapter. Further, Figure 10 exemplifies how users responded directly to comments made by others. The second comment in the figure also shows a clear justification of opinions to why the EU fosters the reduction of food waste while not over-regulating.

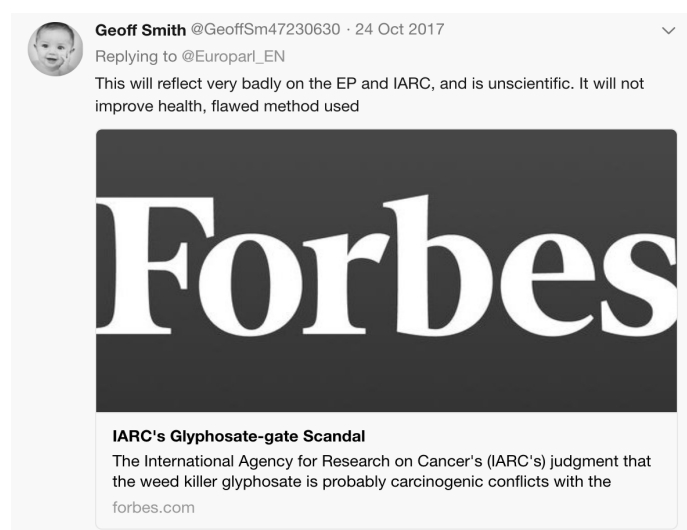*Figure 9. Example of information sharing and justification of opinions*

Figure 10. Example of responsiveness and justification of opinions

As argued in section A of this chapter, the public sphere can be strengthened if the public have unlimited access to information. As information sharing is made easier online, in contrast to traditional offline participation, it is thus interesting to pose the question of why this potential is not utilised by the European public on Twitter. An explanation could be that users simply do not wish to add further information to their comments. Alternatively, it could also be that users do not have information to for example back up their argument with. Furthermore, the role of the EP as an actor that helps facilitate the digital EPS could also have an impact on the public's lack of information sharing.

Chapter III highlighted the dynamic between the official EU institutions as a strong actor and the facilitator of the arena for deliberation, and the public of European citizens as a weaker actor in return. With this in mind, it is thus worth questioning the extent to which the Parliament is limiting the public's utilisation of information sharing tools as it is likely that the Parliament's consistent efforts to not include sources or other collective accounts outside the EU realm have tipped over to the public. As such, the Parliament may constitute as a larger hinder for Europeans' public participation practices on Twitter than was foreseen prior to this thesis' analysis.

E. The Public's Critical Function

The fifth category, the public's critical function, is a central aspect to consider in order to answer the thesis' guiding question. The public's critical function plays a fundamental role for the democratic value of the public sphere, particularly in this thesis' explored case of a digital EPS. As argued in Chapter III, a democratic deficit in the EU is today a concern for the Union as the European citizens' relation to the EU and its institutions is largely estranged. The majority of citizens are no longer well connected to the EU and do not fully understand or have an interest in EU policy. An extended EPS has thus been put forward by academics as a possible solution

for the democratic deficit, particularly in regard to reaching a more cohesive and participatory EU. With this in mind, the critical function of the public was analysed through three indicators; users' evaluation of decision-makers, questioning of decision-makers, and identification of solutions. As such, the thesis has examined if people were identifying problems in the system, and if this critique was followed with suggestions or solutions for the problem in question, as well as the quality of those possible solutions.

In line with the expected results noted in Chapter IV, the coding and analysis of the data showed that the critical function of the European public on Twitter is indeed strong. The public did not only utilise Twitter's communicative potential for general discussions on EU policy, it actively posed critique towards the Union in the comment sections of the Parliament's Tweets. Several users evaluated and questioned decision-makers in their comments and while some criticised the EU as a whole, others would mention European leaders or EU institutions in particular. An example of a comment with a critical core, which both questioned and evaluated the EP is illustrated in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Example of the public's critical function
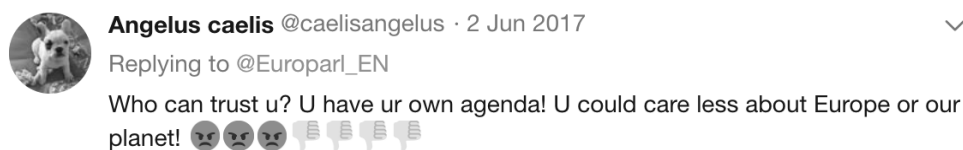
As argued in Chapter III of this thesis, the public sphere should have the potential to be a foundation for a critique of a society based on democratic principles. Thus, the public's extensive utilisation of Twitter's potential for critical discussion was an encouraging find for the existence of a digital EPS. The analysis further showed that the comments had a consistent Eurosceptic tone. As argued in section B of this chapter, similarly to the users' negative conception of the European identity, the Euroscepticism seemingly worked as a sort of unifier of the European citizens on the Twitter page. There were for example often encouragement from other users if a comment contained anti-EU content.
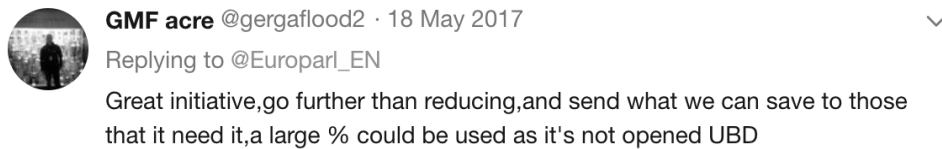
Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the comments with a negative and Eurosceptic tone had been left on the EP's Twitter page, and thus had not been removed by the Parliament even if this would have been possible to do. This is particularly worth highlighting in this analysis because, as argued in Chapter III and previous sections in this Chapter, one of the most common critiques in academia is that the institutional influence is too strong for the public sphere to exist

on SNSs. Contrary to this argument, the Parliament's practice to leave comments untouched, even if they contain critique or Eurosceptic messages, shows that the Parliament is not necessarily interfering with the public's deliberation. As such, they allow, at least in this regard, the digital EPS to grow in a bottom-up way. In turn, this seemingly strengthens the critical function of the public.

Even if the analysis indicated that the public's critical function is strong, few of the comments identified solutions to the matters they criticised, and if solutions were provided it was more often for a problem emphasised by other users. An example of a comment in which the user both evaluated decision-makers and then proposed a solution for how to make the matter in question better is illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Example of evaluation of decision-makers and providing a solution

GMF acre @gergaflood2 · 18 May 2017
Replying to @Europarl_EN
Great initiative,go further than reducing,and send what we can save to those that it need it,a large % could be used as it's not opened UBD

Though a detailed solution to identified problems are not to be expected due to the limited amount of characters one can use in a comment, it is surprising that not even a general direction for how to tackle issues were presented more often. As such, there is seemingly room for improvement of the ways in which the public can further utilise the potential of SNSs.

VII. Concluding Remarks

This thesis set out to investigate the digital EPS and the public of European citizens' participation in European politics through SNSs. A comprehensive overview of current and relevant topics within the field of European studies was provided accordingly. It became evident that the digital structure of SNSs hold vast democratic value as it has increased the possibility for the public of European citizens to participate on EU policy issues through cross-border deliberation. However, no approach in the works on these topics had so far has put forward an empirical actor-focused analysis of how the public of European citizens are truly utilising this potential.

Subsequently, the guiding research question '*In what ways do the public of European citizens make use of social networking sites as a digital European public sphere for political deliberation on EU policy issues?*' was developed. Three sub-questions were also formulated in order to approach this question in a fruitful manner; I) In what ways do the public of European citizens participate politically on EU policy issues through online deliberation on SNSs?, II) What are the public of European citizens discussing during such participation?, and III) In what ways do the public of European citizens display a belonging to a European Community during such participation?. The theoretical foundation helped to further develop the thesis' analytical coding scheme that was originally inspired by Țarta (2017). Through application of the coding scheme and its five criteria to the European public's communication on the EP's official Twitter page, it was possible to examine its discursive tendencies and capacities. The criteria allowed for analysis of the ways in which the public of European citizens participate in European politics through online deliberation, as well as the utilisation of Twitter as a digital EPS.

In regard to sub-question I, the analysis showed that the public of European citizens make use of Twitter's potential for political deliberation in many noteworthy ways. The overall most encouraging finding was that Twitter's potential to work as a foundation for a critique of the EU was largely utilised. The public has a strong critical function on the site, which also confirms the expected result addressed in Chapter IV. It is common practice for the European public to both evaluate and question the EU, its institutions and leaders on the EP's Twitter page. Furthermore, Twitter is utilised for longer and deeper deliberative discussions in an engaged manner and it is for example common for the public to participate in a way in which they do not only deliberate opinions, but also justify them. The public also has a strong individual visibility during the discussions and the majority participate under their full names.

Moreover, the thesis aim was to analyse if SNSs such as Twitter is utilised as a digital EPS for political deliberation on EU policy issues. As such, and in regard to sub-question II, the analysis indicated that many of the comments stay on the EU policy topic decided by the EP's Tweet. If comments deviate from the original topic, they are still within the realm of the EU and European politics. However, the overall tone of the comments were largely Eurosceptic. Also the way in which the public displayed a belonging to the EU had a negative undertone. Concerning sub-question III, the clear identity statements were few and the results are therefore too weak for drawing a conclusion about whether one can speak of a digital EPS. Instead, the

findings from the analysis indicate that something that resembles a more general digital public sphere is taking place on the EP's Twitter page.

Nonetheless, the analysis of the public's deliberation on the EP's Twitter presented hope for a more extensive digital EPS to develop over time. In particular, as the European public is currently showing a strong interest and engagement through longer, deeper and critical deliberative discussions about EU policy on Twitter. As such, it is likely that the participation will extend over time to also include the currently unutilised online ways for participation. As SNSs are constantly developing their structure, new ways for participation on SNSs, which could not have been accounted for in this thesis or in previous works, may also arise and affect the public's participation.

As mentioned above, the analysis showed how most of the online deliberation had a Eurosceptic undertone. Surprisingly, the Euroscepticism however seemingly worked as a unifier of the European public on the site. This leads to further questions regarding if what has been conceptualised as one of the biggest threats of the democratic deficit in the EU, could also possibly be what unifies a deliberative EPS and decreases the democratic deficit. As such, future research concerned with the democratic deficit and the EPS should with benefit be guided by this theoretical consideration. There is also a need for future research within the topics of this thesis to take an approach that is focused on the other actor, the EP. The analysis raised questions about the role the EP plays as a facilitator of the digital EPS and found that the institution have a more significant role for the depth and development of the digital EPS than was considered in the start of the thesis.

Moreover, it is interesting to further consider how SNSs can be utilised as a digital public sphere in other contexts. For example, if the results of this thesis can be generalised to the public of a nation state. Arguably, the EU is a more complicated multilevel system than nation states and to reach a fully EPS is challenging. Despite this however, the thesis' analysis shows that the European public make use of SNSs as a digital public sphere for political deliberation in several noteworthy ways. A nation state has more advantageous conditions for a deliberative digital public sphere and is thus expected to show an even deeper and broader utilisation of SNSs for political participation among its public.

To conclude, this thesis has addressed shortcomings in prior research and developed the current academic understanding of the digital EPS and the European public's participation in European politics. The thesis' overall positive indications of a growing digital public sphere, through which the European public gather and participate on European politics in various ways, should be viewed as an important step towards addressing the concerns of declining participation in its traditional offline form. Even if it is not possible to solve the democratic deficit in the EU just by online deliberation, it can help decrease it. There is therefore a need for researchers of European studies to keep rethinking participation and the EU's democratic deficit in the digital era. In particular, as the results of this thesis indicates that a more extensive digital EPS on SNSs will likely develop over time.

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