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## Mediating politics and architecture The European Parliament from television to the digital age

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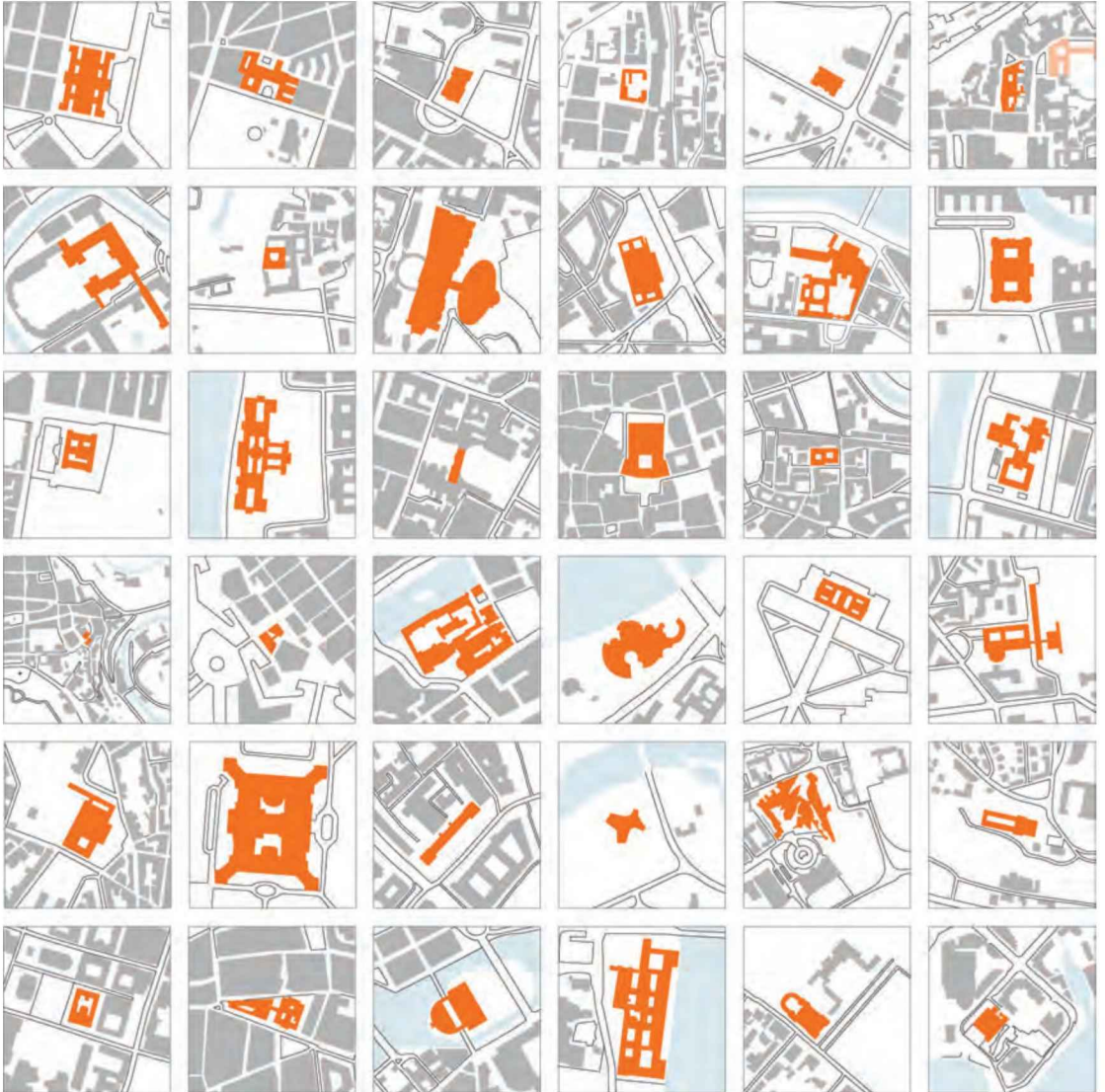
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# PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF POLITICS IN EUROPE



Edited by

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## Mediating politics and architecture

### *The European Parliament from television to the digital age*

Pol Esteve Castelló and Dennis Pohl

#### Introduction

In recent years, the use of digital communication platforms has affected all aspects of our lives – politics is not an exception. The digital era has drastically transformed the forms of engagement between citizens and institutional politics. Generalised internet access has changed the place and pace of political discussion; social media deeply impacts the tone of political debate while portable technologies have made the user a content generator and a dataset at the same time. When television turned politics into a reality show decades ago, information was distributed unidirectionally to a passive audience. However, the digital provides a means of interactive communication where each agent is both sender and receiver. The consequences of such paradigmatic change in the circulation of information are still being evaluated. But how do they relate to the architecture of politics – both physically and digitally? The European Parliament (EP), the only political body directly elected by 447 million European Union (EU) citizens, provides an exemplary case study to explore the potentials and risks brought by the digital era in relation to architecture, institutional politics and democracy.

Based on historical and field research conducted in the EP in 2016, this chapter questions what agency architecture has in shaping democracy between physical and digital space. We look at the media history of the EU to understand how politics and ‘the political’ meet in the institutional space of parliament and foster a democratic culture in the digital era. By politics we mean the regulated institutional speech and spatial setting that covers a broad set of activities related to government, political parties and politicians. Politics aims for consensus and involves citizens in differ-



ent ways, from being passive spectators to becoming active interlocutors. By ‘the political’ we understand the negotiations in political debate beyond institutionally regulated speech. With Chantal Mouffe, we consider ‘the political’ as creating, ‘agonistically’, a heterogeneous public sphere (Mouffe 2005). This is conceived as a space where (political) adversaries do not become ‘antagonistic’, nor enemies. In fact, agonism is ‘the very condition for a vibrant democracy’ (Mouffe 2013, p. 7), and the necessary condition under which we see democratic culture developing in the coming years.

In this context, the EU and its parliament are paradigmatic of how new forms of remote and distributed participation through media allow for an agonistic expression of differentiated political voices. New media technologies are being incorporated into institutional politics, thus defining new patterns of regulated speech. Yet difficulties in bridging politics and ‘the political’ remain. This chapter addresses the tensions and opportunities emerging from the encounter between politics and ‘the political’ as it is reified in the relationship between physical space and mediated space. On one hand, we analyse how broadcasting and digital communications restructure political debate and citizen participation, creating new forms of speech. On the other hand, we recognise that new media platforms also produce inequalities and can even interfere with democratic processes.

## Arranging speech between the *agora* and the *panyx*

For architectural historians and political scientists, parliament is a legislative and representative institution. The parliament building in particular is considered both instrumental to regulating political speech and a symbol of democracy. In addition, political debate happens informally – or at least not regulated by institutional rules – in the street, the bar, the family living room and so on. The separation of these two differentiated spaces has been present in western culture at least since ancient Greece (Arendt 1958). Although this dichotomy might seem heuristic, as the distinction between public and private crosses these spaces (Habermas 1992), it reveals two distinct principles of regulated and informal speech. As the sociologist Richard Sennett argued, the complementarity between the *panyx* as a space for orderly speech and the *agora* as a space to experience diversity with informal debates essentially equilibrated Greek political life (Sennett 1998). Heirs to the principles of the *panyx*, western parliaments have spatially arranged a bipolar position between speaker and audience to organise political speech. Seating was designed to face

either a principal orator or other parliamentary members. Parliamentary chambers are not built for distributed or multifocal political debate.

Even when television acquired a central role for political communication during the second half of the twentieth century, parliament remained the main physical site and symbol for political speech regulated by institutional rules. Following Sennett, parliament remained a *pnux* while television enlarged the *agora*. Despite mass media accelerating the circulation of information, a gap remained between the parliament as a physical space for institutionally regulated speech and the outside as a physical space for informal forms of political debate regulated through social and informal norms, understandings and expectations. This is reflected in the fact that, until the digital era, scholars mainly addressed the space of parliament, and particularly the semicircle, focusing on their physical agency. Political scientists have considered how the ideology of political systems was reflected in architectural forms and the spatial disposition of the parliament (von Beyme 2004). Architects engaging with parliaments worldwide assumed that democratic or authoritarian notions were shaped by spatial settings (XML 2017). The form of a plenary hall, they argue, is not only explained by functional necessities such as acoustics or visual aspects, but an expression of political culture (Döring 1995; Sennett 1998).

Yet it became evident with the arrival of the digital that political debate inside and outside parliament might never have been quite as separated as Sennett suggests. Parliamentary debate already spilled over into television debate formats and social interactions, which in turn did not go unnoticed by parliamentarians. For instance, when the UK Parliament's sessions started to be broadcasted, parliamentarians feared politics would become a 'theatre' (Franklin 1992). But with the digital, Baudrillard's hypothesis of television drawing people into a play of images, blurring all boundaries between reality and simulation (Baudrillard 1983), seems to have been confirmed. At least partially, digital technologies blur the separation between these two allegedly differentiated physical spaces: parliament as the realm of politics and the space beyond it as the realm of 'the political'. Although television broadcasted parliamentary debates into living rooms and therefore directly inserted political speech into public debate, as much as radio and journalism formerly did, no interaction was possible. Parliament and the living room were unidirectionally connected until the digital era brought public interaction and informal debate closer to political institutions. With that, the logics of the public square, the bar and the living room, transformed democratic culture in unpredictable ways.

## Televising the European Parliament

To understand the challenges brought by the digital, it is pertinent to look at how the advent of television changed the political setting in the EP. Contrary to digital media, adopted in reaction to its ubiquitous and fast development outside the institution, television has a pioneering history within the EP. The EP was the first parliament in history to broadcast its plenary sessions and implemented policies to distribute 'objective' news transnationally. Almost half a century ago, the EP adapted television protocols to transmit political speeches to an audience outside the chamber. It adopted media policies that regulated satellite transmission for a common market (Collins 1998; Holtz-Bacha 2006), and collaborated in setting up the TV channels Eurovision, Europa TV and Euronews to foster what it conceived as a new European *demos* in the first European elections of 1979. In a pioneering move, the Parliament introduced cameras to the semicircle and adapted its own plenary sessions to be publicly broadcast on television, at a time when national parliaments were still reluctant to do so.

The EP's proactive policies towards mass media – adapting its semicircle to camera positions, broadcasting parliamentary debates and standardising television technology throughout Europe – contrasted with politicians still following Winston Churchill's belief that parliament would need to be protected 'against the mass and against the machine'. By 'machine', Churchill was referring to television; for him it was 'a shocking thing to have the debates of Parliament forestalled by this new robot organisation of television and BBC broadcasting' (quoted in Cockerell 1988, p. 41; Franklin 1992). We hypothesise then not only that the EP has a history of media networks (television and radio) and formats (news, parliamentary debates, TV studio debates and so on) that have shaped public notions of a European democracy to date, but in the same fashion, we argue, the digital has the power to determine a future notion of European democracy.

Not coincidentally, the first step was taken when Denmark, the UK and Ireland joined the European Community in 1973. After the parliament had outgrown the physical capacity of the first parliament building, the Maison de l'Europe in Strasbourg, the semicircle in the new building, Palais d'Europe, was designed twice the size (Monnet et al. 1951; Dassler 1951). However, the main difference between these two buildings was that the visitor galleries in the former building were replaced by television facilities in the plenary hall. In other words, the new Palais d'Europe kept the audience at a televised distance. Furthermore, to improve the

image quality of plenary sessions, the new TV cameras were operated with a remote-controlled robotic pan and tilt system by Vinten, a fast and precise mechanical device initially developed for military purposes (Figure 18.1). While this enhanced the video transmission, and thereby the viewer experience, it removed the cameramen as a human factor when broadcasting from the plenary hall.

From an adjunct television studio, operators were able to dial a camera position according to the seat of a member of the European Parliament (MEP) in order to record the speaker without disturbing the plenary session (Figure 18.2).

This period of the 1970s was marked by a general scepticism from the public, challenging the legitimacy of European integration. Consequently, the European Community sought to improve its public image and include citizens (Sternberg 2013, pp. 78–102). In this regard, television can be seen as an instrumental medium for the attempt to change what was perceived as a “Europe of bureaucrats” into a “Europe of people” – and to promote direct universal suffrage (European Parliament 1975, p. 69). The EP launched a large institutional television information campaign and directed advertising agencies in every member state to explain the

**Figure 18.1** Remote Vinten television camera in the Plenary Hall. © European Communities, 1988

**Figure 18.2** Audiovisual facilities in Strasbourg, 1994. © European Communities, 1994

elections in a ‘neutral’ way, to raise public awareness without political bias – at least in theory. In practice, no campaign, no speech, nor any TV camera is free of bias, as a closer look to the role of television in the Parliament will reveal.

## Using technical standards for political reach

At the turn of the 1980s, the European Community was convinced that ‘radio and television are today the chief media for informing and shaping public opinion’. For this reason, it supported the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)<sup>1</sup> and national television companies in turning the Eurovision network – which was established in the 1950s – into ‘a European television channel’ that promotes objective information and European culture as ‘diversity in unity’ (European Community 1982, pp. 110–112; Fickers and Lommers 2010).

The territorial coverage of Eurovision transmissions followed a clear geopolitical strategy. In order to reach its European target audience, Eurovision adopted specific technical standards so that the signal was received in western Europe – but not beyond the iron curtain.

To broadcast live content from the European parliamentary sessions, Eurovision operated with EBU transmission standards, called PAL and SECAM-L. The standards were not immediately compatible with the standards of the so-called Eastern Bloc, which had a different radio frequency spacing. Technically, black-and-white images could be received on both sides of the iron curtain; however, the east could not receive both image and sound simultaneously, but only one or the other (Simmering 1989, p. 3; Fickers 2007). Format and content thus reveal the political power of communication technologies. The use of technical standards predetermines the medium and the reach of the message: European politics would be televised only to western Europeans. Marshall McLuhan's 'global village', to whom the EP referred in TV-policy reports, was a western, Europeanised village framed by the EBU standards (European Commission 1983, p. 9).

During the 1980s, the EP not only adapted its own architecture with audiovisual equipment for broadcasting, but it also actively backed policies that saw in satellite television a means to counter Euroscepticism (Collins 1998; Holtz-Bacha 2006). Specifically, the EP believed that opening up its own proceedings for live television, and creating a common European News channel and a film organisation, could be beneficial in building up a common audience and a common image of Europe. The idea of a European television consortium took shape in autumn 1985. Four European broadcasters – the German ARD, the Dutch NOS, the Italian RAI and the Irish RTE, with the later addition of the Portuguese television RTP, joined forces to launch a new experimental programme, *Europa TV*. This aimed for a declared 'non-national perspective' to promote impartial and unbiased information but was rather short-lived. It closed after one year, revealing the limits of such an endeavour (European Parliament 1984a, p. 7; European Parliament 1984b, pp. 147–150).

Indeed, the extent to which a 'non-national perspective' can presume to be unbiased, and how the political shaping of parliamentary sessions affects the viewers' perceptions, became evident with events such as Ronald Reagan's address to the EP on 8 May 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. That day, his speech was interrupted by Left-wing and Green parliamentary members who protested from their seats against the proliferation of nuclear arms and the US intervention in Nicaragua (O'Donnell 1992). It cannot be attributed to the inattentiveness of the remote cameramen that the worldwide live coverage filmed by the official cameras from the centre of the semicircle entirely omits images of the protesters and any audience reactions. Contrastingly, footage by independent broadcaster cameras filming the

**Figure 18.3** Protests in the background of Ronald Reagan’s speech in the EP in Strasbourg on 8 May 1985. © European Communities 1985

same event from the journalist tribune show the antiwar message boards brought into the semicircle (Figure 18.3).<sup>2</sup>

Institutional and independent camera lenses thus offered two entirely different (political) perspectives. If muting public opinion was the price for objectivism, it was arguably the opposite of what the EP had intended – it was not ‘adequately’ informing European citizens. Quite the contrary: the audience does not know what the audience does not see. This episode made evident how the construction of institutional narratives depended on the spatial setting of broadcasting technologies. The position and framing of the camera is both a design and a political question: it determines what and who reaches the audience and thus shapes public debate.

In addition to the power to frame the view and control the message, television gave independent broadcasters the power to quantify TV quota, to process viewer data and calculate popularity. Even if broadcasting parliamentary sessions across the world have disappointing ratings, analysing viewer quota foreshadows a form of data economy for broadcasters, that becomes decisive for politics in the digital age. But beyond that, it confirmed Churchill’s fears of turning politics into reality

TV shows, sustained by the fact that politicians could receive immediate feedback about the success and impact of their broadcasting footage in terms of audience parameters. This makes the media-technical condition of politics so problematic. Analysing, predicting and targeting the audience become as relevant as the content of debate: a media-based form of politics that would be decisive for later media strategies of populism. TV quota are the predigital statistical forms of what metadata means today for politics in the digital age (Pohl 2022). Consequently, it is only a question of computation power until these are strategically used as a weapon in politics. In other words, television was an efficient medium for the Parliament to distribute the principles of directed and regulated speech to the European public, but it bore risks for the institution which would only become explicit in the digital era.

## Programming the European user-electorate

Following the introduction of television as a quantifiable medium in parliamentary activities, it is not surprising that the EU has also rapidly incorporated digital resources into its communication infrastructures. Its geographical scale together with its vast and diverse citizenry are reason enough to get a grip on the newest media technologies with the aim to foster citizen engagement. In the last years, EU institutions have become not only testing grounds for new narratives on power linked to media representation, but also a battleground to fight the disruptive impact that digital media can have on democratic processes. In recent years the Commission and the EP have been active in creating digital policies, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union 2012). The arrival of social media and big data have accentuated a growing crisis of institutional disaffection, that was made particularly evident after the 2008 debt crisis divided Europe. In this context, the EP, like national parliaments, has had to confront the increasing presence and power of independent media platforms. Since the turn of the century, the EP – both as an instrument for the regulation of political speech and as a symbol of democracy – has developed a conflictual relationship with the faster and interactive forms of communication enabled by digital platforms.

In the last decades, the omnipresence and continuous information feed provided by digital platforms have considerably displaced political debate into the digital space. This is exemplified by political movements that made intensive use of social media, such as the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer 2013) and the EuroMaidan (MacDuffee Metzger and



Tucker 2017) as well as the popularity of some politicians' private accounts on social media, such as the French president, Emmanuel Macron, with more than 4 million followers on Twitter or Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, with almost 1.5 million followers on Twitter. In this context, where new media has expanded the diversity and volume of politically relevant information (Schroeder 2018), certain parliamentary logics and principles of speech have been disrupted and substituted by a distributed field of online exchanges between political institutions and citizens, humans and bots. The unidirectionality of the orator speaking towards a defined audience in the plenary hall has been displaced by the constant real-time exchange of posts and comments between the public, which nurtures feeds and infinite scrolls and turns every user into a speaker.

If we look back at the distinction between spaces of orderly debate and of informal discussion signified by the *pnux* and the *agora*, and we compare them with digital space and the logics of communication on digital platforms, the digital appears closer to the *agora* than the *pnux*. While the debating practices of parliaments have been slow to adapt, digital media have brought informal debating principles of the public square closer to the parliament's semicircle. Or rather, perhaps, digital technologies have merged all spaces into one. It could be argued that a new representational topology emerged, in which several public spaces and private spaces overlap with each other. Departing from Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's understanding of the rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) as non-hierarchical, decentred and heterogeneous, we could argue that the digital is deployed in a rhizomatic space that opposes the logics of the Euclidean space of the physical parliament and semicircle. In other words, while the semicircle constitutes a topology that relies on objects and points – the relative position of the speaker and listener, the dais and so on – digital space constitutes a smooth topology that relies on sets of relations between multiple actors or users. This new topology is not predominantly visual, like the semicircle privileging the view towards the speaker or even television, but also tactile – the finger touches the screen or the keyboard to interact. Thus emerges a new representational topology for politics, one which is based not on the univocality of the parliamentarian speaker but on the polyvocality of digital users simultaneously interacting with the screens. The symbolic character of the parliament has been distributed into several platforms crossing the entire political spectrum, which are taken as representative for the interests of potential electoral groups.

The role of digital platforms in European politics became most evident during the process of the UK's referendum on European membership in

2016. In a context where European politics was contrasted to national politics, public interest in the referendum went hand in hand with the popularisation of social media, which rivalled television. Although this phenomenon was particularly acute in the UK, it also impacted European politics at large. At a national level, political debate was increasingly occurring outside institutional frameworks. Personal social media accounts of popular politicians and media personalities often had a stronger impact on national audiences than established television channels and press or institutional communications. Particularly in the UK, Facebook and Twitter contributed significantly to the politicisation of public debate (Brändle, Galpin and Trenz 2021; Šimunjak 2022). Contrastingly, on a European level, political actors like MEPs often lacked sufficient individual presence on social platforms to generate debate and public engagement.

Not long before the Brexit debate took over European politics, a technologically advanced television studio was erected inside the EP building in Brussels (Figure 18.4). With the intention to introduce more interactive forms of communication, the EP intuitively anticipated the role social media would acquire around the time of the referendum.<sup>3</sup>

This studio exceeded in scale and ambition those already existing in the Brussels and Strasbourg parliamentary complexes. The most advanced digital broadcasting equipment was installed in order to facilitate online live and interactive political discussions with the citizens through digital platforms. Independent journalists, analysts, specialists and parliamentarians themselves could use the set to engage in a conversation with a digital public. The new TV studio, along with institutional social media accounts – which generally had more followers than the personal accounts of MEPs – offered an institutional framework of a space and camera equipment for the MEPs to address the European public on social media, both through their own channels and the EP Facebook account. With this operation, the parliament building intended to become a more transparent space for debate, embracing the interactivity of digital platforms and breaking with the unidirectionality of the plenary sessions and broadcasting protocols still in place. The set was meant to operate as a sort of digital *agora* to produce political discourse. Participatory politics were enacted by Facebook Live discussions with politicians, where citizens were able to interact and ask direct questions. The new TV set facilitated the production of a stream of interactive content that, to an extent, could be institutionally curated – establishing live interaction, filtering the questions and allowing the speaker to prepare the conversation beforehand – and purposefully used to distribute an institutional narrative through social networks.



**Figure 18.4** TV set in the interior of the European Parliament. © Esteve and Pohl 2019

This new operational format implied a shift from the passive viewer-electorate towards a newly constituted user-electorate, addressed by interactive interfaces between the institution and citizens. It also revealed the need for other representational broadcasting spaces connected to the digital. The ‘Brexit TV studio’ – as we would name it after the relevance it acquired during Brexit discussion – is located in the central axis of the parliament building and has views over the main central hall and the public square in front of the building, significantly called Agora Simone Veil. The interactive set rivalled the semicircle in its privileged position within the building and in providing a representative space for (digital) political debate. In this set, the physical encountered the digital to create a representative space for interactive political debate and thus bring ‘the political’ to ‘politics’.

However, despite these efforts, the results have been rather discrete in terms of popularity. For instance, when Antonio Tajani, at the time EP president, participated in a Facebook Live discussion, only around 700



**Figure 18.5** Screenshot of Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, in a Facebook Live discussion with citizens, 1 June 2019. © Esteve and Pohl 2019

out of 446 million inhabitants in the EU were connected (Tajani 2019; Figure 18.5).

In October 2021, similar results were obtained when Jytte Guteland, a member of the EP's committee for the environment, discussed on Facebook Live the European Climate Law,<sup>4</sup> affecting environmental policies until 2050 – which was going to be voted on the day after in the semicircle. Furthermore, the presence of the EP on social networks is residual, and direct citizen participation in political debate through digital platforms

is almost negligible. As an example, the EP president Roberta Metsola has only 57,000 followers on Instagram and 61,000 on Twitter; the EP's Facebook page has around 2.6 million followers, its Instagram account 330,000. Taking into consideration that Europe has around 400 million active Facebook users, more than 100 million on Instagram and around 120 million on Twitter, the engagement with the EP's institutional and MEPs' personal accounts is low. There are surely multiple reasons behind citizens' disengagement, but we suggest that exchanges such as Facebook Live are seen as impactless events, which are instrumentalised by the institution to create an *image* of openness, rather than being an effective tool for public participation.

## Participation versus representation

In recent years, participatory politics has been on the agenda of European institutions to further engage with citizens, advance democratic strategies and counteract misuses of media platforms. Like television, social media is quantifiable, polls can be generated equally by viewer and user data. The data generated by clicks, likes and comments can be used purposefully to better understand citizens' political stances and expose users to certain content, shaping opinions with the very form of the digital space people navigate in. This can also be misused, when platforms such as Facebook are instrumentalised to interfere in the public debate with partisan purposes – as we have seen with the Cambridge Analytica affair (Cadwalladr 2017; Brändle et al. 2021).

Motivated by the EU's decade-long efforts of institutional legitimacy, participation was seen as key for setting up a less hierarchical 'good governance', according to the EC white paper from 2001 (European Commission 2001, p. 10; Sternberg 2013, pp. 128–152). In 2019, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier set out three principles for a more participative democracy: transparency (making as many documents as possible public), cooperation (with all key decision-makers, notably member state governments and the EP) and consultation (with business representatives, think tanks, civil society and other interest groups). These principles had already been introduced by the Lisbon Treaty as transparency, civil society dialogue and participation in Article 8 (European Union 2007), and were consolidated on the Treaty on European Union revision in Title II Articles 9 to 11, which affirm the right of every citizen to 'participate in the democratic life of the Union' (European Union 2012).

Barnier did not speak for the EP and the examples above were not direct EP initiatives, yet they reflected an overall ambition of EU

institutions to bring politics closer to citizens. But with Brexit looming, the EP adapted its architecture with the TV studio and its media politics with the aim to expand democratic participation – also digitally. Building on the European Citizens Initiative,<sup>5</sup> the European Network of Ombudsmen,<sup>6</sup> or the European Parliament Committee on Petitions,<sup>7</sup> the institutions seek to further engage with private actors and platforms – such as Change.org. Most recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe was designed as a hybrid forum, to include online interaction and physical participation (Figure 18.6). In partnership with the Commission and the Council, the EP launched a website, where citizens could interactively discuss and register their opinions, and co-hosted a series of live events, organised by independent entities across Europe. The objective was to engage with citizens across EU territories and, in their words, to listen ‘from all walks of life and corners of the Union’.<sup>8</sup> First assessments, however, criticised the conference as being a blend between bottom-up participatory democracy and top-down elite decision-making, in which the constitutional mandate and institutional organisation remain uncertain (Fabbrini 2020).

In parallel, as the EP in Brussels outgrows its own building, it continues to expand physically, most recently in 2008 with the addition of the

**Figure 18.6** Inaugural event of the Conference on the Future of Europe in the EP in Strasbourg on 9 May 2021. © European Union 2021



**Figure 18.7** View of an editing room in the EP in Brussels. On the screens can be seen several of the meeting rooms in the complex. © Esteve and Pohl 2021

József Antall building and its five large conference rooms (Figure 18.7). Hundreds of political discussions hosted by the parliamentarians, 27 committees and subcommittees and 39 delegations, which happen across the parliamentary buildings, are still inaccessible to citizens. The general public cannot access the building without special permission, meetings and discussions can only partially be followed online in a non-interactive manner. Architecture continues to act as a filter mechanism.

With the EP announcing a new architectural competition for the redesign of its plenary building in Brussels on 26 May 2020, public access and transparency may now be reconsidered – but equally, it may not. Although the competition brief insisted on the symbolic relevance of the EP as the ‘home of European democracy’, the relation to digital media remained underdeveloped. Instead, the brief stated that ‘democratic heritage’ should be ‘preserved and further developed as a strong symbol of our modern history’. For the Parliament, this meant that it ‘seeks a paradigm of architecture and strong visual identity for the building and the Chamber. This design should [...] resonate with the European citizens as a representation of the power of their voice’ (European Parliament 2020). Representation instead of participation was also the guiding principle in the antiquated media concepts in the brief, meticulously explaining the arrangement of journalists and camera crews. Consequently, it remains up to the design team to find creative solutions to address the role of digital media in relation to the physical spaces of the parliament.

## **Conclusion: designing policies, protocols and architecture for a *phygital* parliament**

Despite the undeniable disruptive impact the digital space has had on representative democracy in recent years, such as misinformation, surveillance abuse, and troll farms, it is still unclear how the digital space can be shaped according to principles of representative democracy. We have observed how the EU adapted to the rise of digital media through new policies, such as the GDPR, and through physical interventions in the working of its parliament, such as the Brexit TV studio. The physical space of the parliament could provide valuable insight into this problem, as designing policies and architecture becomes a collaborative task for politicians and architects alike, that has a particular history within the EP.

Doubtless, the efforts of participatory democracy over the course of European integration cannot only be assigned to the EP. Euroscepticism has been a challenge for the entire European Community at least since the 1970s. However, the EP has probably been the most affected institution.



As the history of television shows, the EP broadcasted its plenary sessions, adapted its plenary hall to TV cameras, and advocated for several TV programmes to promote the first European elections in the late 1970s. In other words, television became instrumental for the EP, literally mediating representative democracy. But while television reached the targeted audience, it excluded any form of interaction.

Even if new digital media may promise participatory democracy, and the EP made efforts to be present on social media platforms, they come along with the pitfall of risking manipulation, capture and access inequality. In a recent article in *The Economist*, the founder of *Renew Democracy*, Garry Kasparov (Kasparov 2020), advocated for further integration between technology and politics. The initiative's aim was to avoid market forces and interests conflicting with democratic principles to take control of the media complex, instead enabling social communication and political discussion. If the EP were to redesign its media politics, it should start by questioning the normativity and structure of hegemonic digital platforms. Instead of taking these for granted, the EU has the legislative power to redesign Europe's communication channels, while the EP could apply such legislation in favour of public interest, integrating its own plenary procedures with *agoraic* political debate.

Nevertheless, representative democracy has something to offer that social media cannot replace. It provides clear procedural principles of speech, allowing different factions of society to be heard through their representatives. Even if not all citizens feel fully represented, at least the regulatory practices of speech offer a space of discussion that avoids the negative implications of political debate in social media. Often, the attention economy of social media reduces information to emotional content, prioritises popular feeds, and creates intellectual isolation by personalised information selectivity according to the ideological frame of user groups. In the Greek *agora* it meant only those who shouted their opinion the loudest were heard. Representative democracy, on the contrary, mediates information in a regulated manner, ideally considering manifold informed perspectives to arrive at a public judgement and deep deliberation. In the Greek *panyx* it meant regulated speech of elected representatives, facilitated by a specific type of parliamentary architecture. So how could architecture help to mediate between the two?

The challenge is to link digital infrastructures to physical space, supporting participation by embracing both the capacity of social platforms to generate interest in politics and the human affects generated in physical encounters. Or even more importantly, to constitute a new participatory architecture between digital and physical that includes

representative democratic principles. For the participatory dynamics of social media, this means to learn from the orderly principles of the *pnvx*, the semicircle and the parliament, by including productive strategies to articulate speech into the digital, stemming from the tradition of institutional representative democracy. Institutional architecture could also challenge its traditional configurations, by considering the form of the parliament and expanding its activities beyond its current limits by embracing the potentials of remote interaction. This could provide the necessary equilibrium for democracy between spaces for regulated speech and informal debate, integrating them in one. The future of democracy needs to overcome the duality of the *agora* and the *pnvx* while seeking the construction of an agonistic public sphere. It needs to imagine a new smooth topology that also contains objects and points. It is in the capacity of the EU and the EP to design and build this *phygital* in-between – between digital and physical – that opens the possibility of politics meeting ‘the political’ in unforeseen ways, and yet fosters new forms of agonistic speech on which democracy could keep growing.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The European Broadcasting Union is an organisation of public service media founded in 1950. It is unrelated to the EU but has broadcast debates between candidates to the European Commission presidency and parliamentary elections.
- <sup>2</sup> Compare President Reagan’s Address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, 8 May 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dysv5ozSj5w> (accessed on 8 May 2020) and President Reagan’s Trip to Strasbourg, France, on 8 May 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBRbOh92LI> (accessed on 8 May 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> The information regarding the installation of the new TV set has been gathered from an interview with Johanna Den Hertog and Wilfried Kumeling, both members of the Directorate-General for Communication, Directorate for Media, and Audiovisual Unit of the European Parliament. The interview was conducted on 18 November 2021 in the European Parliament in Brussels.
- <sup>4</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 June 2021 establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No. 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999.
- <sup>5</sup> The European Citizens’ Initiative, introduced in the Treaty of Lisbon, is an EU mechanism providing a direct path for citizens to propose new laws. Its aim is to enable EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies. Any initiative reaching 1 million signatures will be considered by the European Commission. Further information can be found here: [https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/\\_en](https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/_en) (accessed on 29 February 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> The European Network of Ombudsmen, established in 1996, links together national and regional ombudsmen in Europe, and similar bodies of the EU member states, candidate countries, and other European Economic Area countries, as well as the European Ombudsman and the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament, to address citizens’ complaints at the right levels.
- <sup>7</sup> The European Parliament Committee on Petitions is a body ensuring that all citizens’ petitions are provided with a response: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/petitions/en/home> (accessed on 29 February 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> See: What is the Conference on the Future of Europe? <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about?locale=en> (accessed on 3 March 2022).

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