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(Hrsg.)

# Soziologie der Parlamente

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# The Interactive Parliament

## Evolving Use of Digital Media by National Legislatures in the EU

Julia Schwanholz, Patrick Theiner and Andreas Busch<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

How has the digital transformation under way across society affected parliaments? This chapter looks at the communication function with a particular view on social media use and draws for its analysis on two surveys of parliamentary websites across 28 EU member states conducted in 2015 and 2016. After presenting and describing the survey results, the chapter discusses the substantial variation across countries as well as the apparently dynamic development in overall parliamentary digital media use before offering an attempt at explanation focusing on social and political variables.

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## 1 Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Internet, and also mobile smartphones and tablets have quite naturally been part of our everyday lives for many years. They are one facet of digital transformation that extends across and affects all areas of social life. Digitalization offers a wide range of new potentials in business, politics, science and the media. However, along with these chances and opportunities, new problem areas arise since technological progress takes no breaks. People must process more and more information within less and less time and must adjust to ever-faster, completely new production processes, in which some

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1 The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge research assistance from Frauke Riebe and Niklas Krösche.

feel human intervention is hardly needed any more. This is true, for example, when intelligent machines and systems start to communicate directly with each other. We also experience technical developments in leaps and bounds with unprecedented innovations and disruptions as well as completely new achievements.

Just as with other professions, this process has prompted many new research questions in the social sciences. With respect to parliaments, the epistemological topic of this anthology, the present chapter is meant to examine the potentials and limitations of digitalization from a specific perspective. It is therefore a question of exploring the intersection of political science and communication science as to how well the websites of parliaments are equipped for fulfilling their parliamentary communication function. Verification of whether digital and social media are being used by national parliaments mostly gives information on how they fulfill their information and education mandate in the age of digitalization. Unlike members of parliament, who, in their function as representatives of the people, act in a party-political manner, national parliaments have an obligation to report in a neutral and balanced way. This article will also deal with the question as to what extent this will help them to counteract the decreasing trust in state institutions, particularly in parliaments.

This chapter begins with an outline of the three main challenges digital transformation poses to parliaments before looking at previous work on the topic conducted by the authors. In the ensuing section, political communication will be functionally classified as the central task of parliaments; it will be discussed and linked with the findings on the decreasing trust in state institutions (e. g., frustration with parliament). It seems to be necessary to consider the increasing online presence of the EU-citizens and to assess its relevance for the parliamentary communication function.

An empirical analysis of the parliamentary websites of all 28 EU-member states then forms the core of the chapter. After describing the methodical approach and the selection of the cases, the results of the descriptive statistics for December 2016, i. e. the time of data compilation, will be presented. The results of this cross-section will be expanded to a longitudinal section by means of a time comparison. For this purpose, we will use the results from the earlier investigation (January 2015) and compare them with the data we compiled 23 months later (December 2016). To conclude, we test a number of variables regarding their explanatory potential for the differences between countries and over time.

## 2 **Digital Transformation: New Challenges for Parliaments**

Parliamentary processes are based on routines resulting from clear procedural rules that are laid down in the standing orders. When political will-formation behind closed doors (standard in the parliamentary realm) is challenged by an ever-louder call for greater transparency of political decision-making processes, parliaments must not ignore this – this is the perspective of democratic theory. It is one of the core tasks of parliament to communicate. By means of the new technical possibilities, such as portable real-time communication, the way political decisions come about can be communicated faster and more directly than was the case before the Internet or Web 2.0. However, the question is whether the members of parliaments (MPs) in their everyday routines are willing to adjust to the new communication opportunities that are available due to technical change, and thus to technical change itself. Innovations always come with a drawback: for example, availability around the clock can mean even more time pressure for the collective work in parliament as well as for individual MPs in fulfilling their tasks. Thus, it is possible that MPs do not want to give up their tried and tested analogue routines at all.

Furthermore, every day numerous new digital issues (such as digital infrastructure, how to deal with intellectual property and personal data on the web, cyber bullying, fake news and big data, net neutrality, industry 4.0 and much more) find their way onto the parliamentary agenda. At times, the very specific regulatory requirements and policy questions are urgent and particularly important with respect to their content and thus a prompt decision on them is necessary. At other times, they are a little less urgent, but require special expertise before a parliamentary decision can be made. In comparison to the executive, parliaments are a lot less well-equipped (Döhler 2012). Their capacities are limited to process particularly urgent or very complex and difficult political issues appropriately and in a timely manner. As parliaments in the EU have only just begun – if at all – to build up expertise in network policy and the digital field within their own ranks, those aspects, which pose a lasting challenge for all political areas, are even more challenging for the new policy of digitalization. A good example of this is the German Bundestag's "Digital Agenda" committee, which was established in 2014 (for details on its background and constitution cf. Schwanzholz i. V.). While its own members feel that it should have been established a lot earlier, many other parliaments in the EU still do not have any comparable body. This may be due to the fact that digital policy is considered a cross-sectional topic. Thus, by virtue of its wide range of topics, it touches a large number of different policy and regulatory areas and, therefore, it cannot be assigned to one single area of responsibility. However, demands for a digital ministry – up

until now in Germany digital policy is spread out over several ministries with the responsibility for the digital agenda being with the Federal Government in the Department of Economic Affairs – clearly question this view. The advocates of a digital ministry postulate the need for focused specialist expertise in the form of a ministry in the executive branch. For the Bundestag and the completion of its parliamentary tasks it can thus be said that the committee has clearly taken on a leading role as a thematically relevant, competent decision-making body consisting of politicians with the required specific expertise. And yet, the assessment of its work from the perspective of the population is rather disappointing because only little information gets out and the committee is only known to experts. Therefore, if the assessment scale is based upon communication about the committee's work and transparency concerning its workings and topics, there is plenty of room for improvement for the parliamentary communication function (cf. Schwanholz et al. 2018).

A third point is how content society is with its governmental system. Representative democracy is subjected to testing by the digital media since politics no longer primarily takes place in terms of political debates in parliament, which in its literal sense is the political space intended for this purpose. The task to do politics is no longer delegated only to elected representatives. Citizens are increasingly taking charge of their ideals themselves and looking for new ways of political participation. Politics also goes online for this purpose. For example, a shift of political discussions away from the traditional bar-room discussions towards social networks can be observed. Empirical findings prove a stagnating or even decreasing voter turnout; membership in political parties is decreasing in all EU countries. Citizens are increasingly less confident in state institutions. Traditional channels for political participation no longer seem to be the first choice.

In contrast to this, with the emergence of the Web 2.0, the opportunities for participation in the political discourse (online and in real time) in social networks and the social media have become differentiated. There is an abundance of online platforms for – not exclusively, but increasing and intense – political discussions. The request to be informed about political decisions comprehensively and at an early stage, and also to be involved in these decisions is noticeable. It challenges the fact that political decision-making is organized by the state. At the same time, for a vivid democracy this request is highly desirable, an expression of an interested and participating citizenry.

The above findings lead to the question of how the new situation should be organized. Do parliaments – in the face of progressing digitalization – have a new obligation vis-à-vis the citizens with respect to reporting on their daily work? Or is it now, with the technical possibilities being available everywhere and to almost

everyone, up to the citizens themselves to obtain this kind of information? In other words, can a society expect its members to be interested in politics, i. e. to actively request information, give interim feedback and, of course, take part in elections regularly? It was none other than Barack Obama who, in one of his last speeches in January 2017, made a strong plea for the individual responsibility of each member of society and reminded us that, in his view, everyone must stand up for the values of democracy.

By and large, it does not seem to look bad for the citizens' interest in politics. Knowledge about the inner workings of parliament as the cornerstone of democracy, however, leaves a great deal of room for improvement (Hierlemann and Sieberer 2014). What is the reason for this and how can this situation be improved? In contrast to the swan song of parliamentary democracy, the proclamation of the age of post-democracy (Crouch 2008) and the writing off of party democracy, this article focuses on the communication function of parliament. This communication task can be classified as a central and important one within the meaning of the politico-educational mandate, whose fulfilment must be critically scrutinized under the impression of the developments and challenges described above.

Since the emergence of ICT, parliamentary websites have been an important channel to convey information to and share it with the public (c. f. Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016, p. 48). In contrast to the realm of parliament, which is characterized by political party competition (i. e. among the individual MPs and between the parliamentary factions), the institutional realm of parliament (where political education is accomplished by the parliamentary administration in the form of neutral reporting) receives a lot less attention from scientists, however. This is also true for the analysis of websites: in scientific studies, the Internet presences of individual MPs are studied more frequently (Kunert 2016; Joshi and Rosenfield 2013; Zittel 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008) than those of the parliaments as a whole (an exception to this observation are the studies by Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013; Leston-Bandeira and Thompson 2013; Leston-Bandeira and Ward 2008).

To the readers of the two previous studies we published earlier (cf. Theiner et al. 2018; Schwanholz and Busch 2016) our astonishment about this is no news as it has always seemed obvious to us that interested, but politically-insufficiently educated citizens, if they find the way to the digital presence of parliament at all, will rarely search for the name of the representative of their constituency – provided they do know his or her name. It is more likely, however, that they enter the domain

that agrees with the name of the parliament ([www.bundestag.de](http://www.bundestag.de) for Germany) or, alternatively, and even more likely, do a keyword search via a search engine.<sup>2</sup>

Following this idea, in their first study on the topic Schwanholz and Busch (2016) raised the question as to which results the citizens may find when they visit the institutional website of their parliament. Are they digitally collected by their parliament? Will they find information portals, contact information and even social networks that provide them with reports on the work of parliament, which they can share and discuss with others? In a comparative case study of the Federal Republic of Germany and Great Britain, in January 2015 the authors evaluated the websites of the two first chambers of these countries, namely of the Bundestag and the House of Commons, by means of a snapshot in time. It specifically examined whether the parliaments offered digital and social media to their visitors and checked the websites against a list of certain tools. The results showed distinct differences in the features offered by the two websites: while in Great Britain nearly all the queried tools were in place, social media were completely absent from the website of the Bundestag. The authors traced these differences back to systematic and professional policy consulting from business and science in the case of Great Britain. A clear interest of the parliamentary administration in optimizing the parliamentary range of information for the population to strengthen the interest in parliament could be identified.

Having become curious as to how the parliamentary websites of other countries are designed and whether the findings would allow systematic statements about forerunners or underachievers, in a second study (Theiner et al. 2018) we set about to investigate all 28 parliamentary websites of the EU-countries (and here again only the respective legislative first chambers; in the Netherlands, this is the Tweede Kamer). The results showed clear winners and losers on the one hand, but also a broad middle ground on the other hand with respect to the features offered by the websites.

The snapshots showed to what extent parliaments are open to interactive, digital communication with citizens and how seriously they take their mandate for political education with the help of digital applications. However, there is a limit to the second study due to the fact that with these snapshots of the websites it does not allow for any conclusions as to whether digitalization reaches the parliaments

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2 The authors are aware of the fact that this is an intuitive approach with anecdotal evidence. Certainly, different countries – for example, due to their electoral systems and the resulting relationships with their voters and constituencies – differ in the intensity of the relationships between the representatives and the represented.

as institutions only in stages. Possible learning and catching-up processes can only be shown by a comparison across time.

Therefore, about two years after the first survey, the authors carried out a second one. In this chapter, a comparison of the results of the EU-28 selection of January 2015 and those of a new complete survey in December 2016 will show all the developments and changes over time – be they catching-up processes, learning effects or the deletion of website content. In this way, we will analyze and describe the differences between the national parliaments. This third article reaches far beyond the previous ones because it also outlines possible reasons for the changes over time. At the end of the article, these will be tested empirically and the results will be discussed critically.

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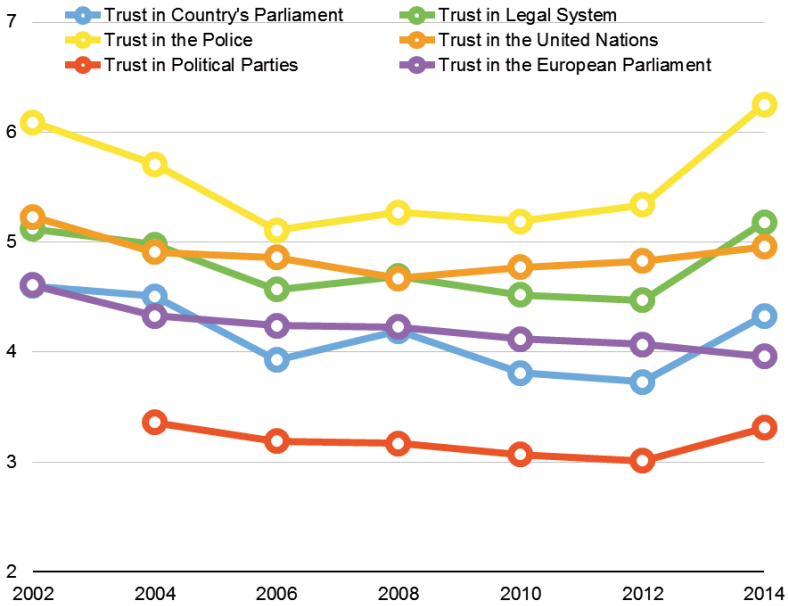
### **3 The Parliamentary Communication Function: More Trust through Direct Information and Constant Availability?**

The central tasks of parliaments are listed in function catalogues – over time sometimes less sometimes more differentiated (see for an overview publication Schindler 1999). Besides legislation, election (and recall) of officials and monitoring of the work of the government, communication also ranges among the functions typically named. With respect to the relationship between the representatives and the represented, Patzelt (2003, p. 24f.) gives four sub-functions, which, in his view, can only collectively establish political legitimacy through adequate communication. These sub-functions are networking, responsiveness, presentation and leadership. For this article, the aspect of the presentation function is particularly important. This function is carried out via parliamentary activities and is designed to inspire faith in representation. This means that a parliament can provide credible evidence that it perceives the concerns, worries, requests and opinions of the members of a society and endeavors to intermeditate between the MPs and the public. This task is normally undertaken by the parliamentary groups. However, it primarily lies within the responsibility of parliament as an institution and finds its expression in non-partisan reporting on the various activities of the national parliament (e.g., plenary debates on legislation, but also cultural events, award ceremonies and art in parliament). Information is conveyed via different channels: on the one hand, mediated by the journalists of the print media, audiovisual media and the radio, on the other hand, directly through parliament's own print and online channels.

The relationship between politics and the media has never been an easy one. The media are referred to as the fourth power in the state and today they are even sometimes mentioned in the same breath as lobby groups (the so-called fifth power in the state). In a mass democracy, it is their responsibility as mass media to inform the public about politics. Thus, they are communicative translators of political events. The everyday reality of the public is only what is reproduced and conveyed by the media. At least so it was for a long time. It has been argued above that this has noticeably changed in the age of digitalization and with the emergence of the Internet and the introduction of the Web 2.0. Conventional media and the reporting by journalists as one-way communication is supplemented by the Internet and one-to-many communication. Today, the lines between individual and mass communication are becoming blurred as former media recipients turn into communicators and senders (cf. Marschall 1999, p. 52). The opportunity for direct, immediate communication with political institutions and decision-makers is a further, newly added stage in the trend towards the erosion of communication channels that used to be clearly separated from one another.

Are these new direct communication possibilities between the representatives and the represented able to reduce the large gaps between them, as assumed by the theses of post-parliamentary democracy, deparliamentarization through Europeanization or politainment (cf. Oberreuter 2013)?

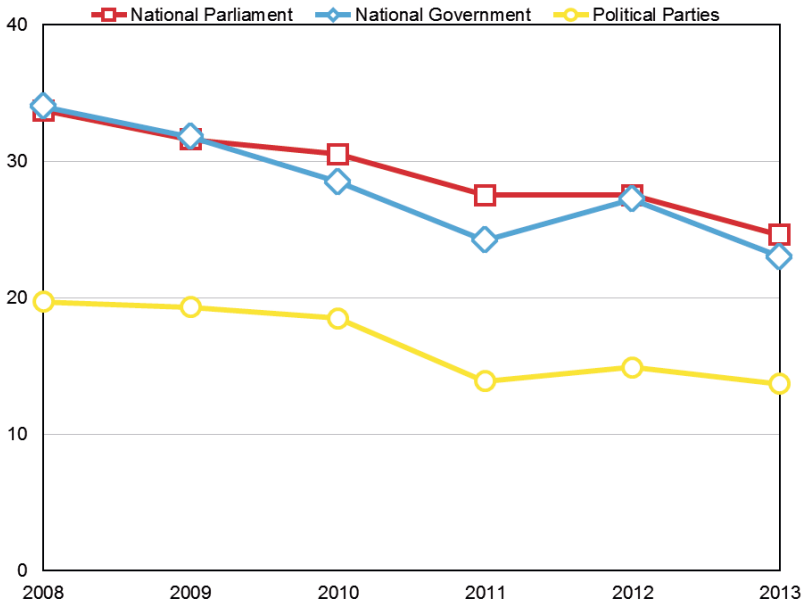
Empirical findings suggest that trust in parliaments is in rather poor shape (cf. Holmberg et al. 2017), compared to other state institutions. Figure 1 below shows the average for trust in national parliaments (blue line) among the participants in the respective European Social Survey. The respondents put even less trust in the EU-parliament (purple line) and the political parties (red line).



**Fig. 1** A Comparison of Trust in State Institutions (Average, 2002-2014)

Source: own calculation and presentation based on European Social Survey (ESS) data (weighted). Arithmetic mean of all valid responses (Scale: 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust)).

Over time, trust in parliaments stagnates at a relatively low level or even decreases slightly (as shown in Figure 2 at the onset of the financial and economic crisis in 2008). With respect to the representation function of the parliaments, a clear potential for improvement concerning reputation, perception and trust in parliaments results from these figures.



**Fig. 2** ‘Tendency to Trust’ in National Parliaments, Governments and Political Parties (% of Respondents, 2008-2013)

Source: own presentation based on data from Eurobarometer 70.1 (2008, QA12); 71.3 (2009, QA9); 73.4 (2010, QA14); 76.3 (2011, QA10); 78.1 (2012, QA11); 80.1 (2013, QA10). Weighted by EU27.

Statistical key figures of the online activities of the citizens in the European Union attest that the amount of average, regular, individual Internet usage (among the 16- to 74-year-olds) in 2016 was at 79 percent (per week) and 71 percent (per day). At least 42 percent (Romania) and at the most 93 percent (Luxemburg) of all EU citizens were permanently online (cf. Eurostat 2017). For the national parliaments, which we are focusing on in this article, the high average value of regular Internet usage (weekly or daily) must be a clear signal to fulfill their representation function also online and digitally. There is a large discrepancy between the values of daily online presence between the national states, though. For instance, there are EU countries where a third of the population (Bulgaria) still has no access to the Internet or does not use it (cf. Eurostat 2017). Thus, the question arises whether a parliament would work on its Internet presence when a substantial part of the population is completely

offline. What attempts at digital connectivity do the national parliaments in the EU make by comparison? The following empirical analysis is intended to answer this question by analyzing the developments comparing the different countries for two different survey periods (2015 and 2016) and finally correlating them with the online presence of the population.

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## **4 Digital media use on parliamentary websites – an EU-wide comparison**

### **4.1 Methodology and case selection**

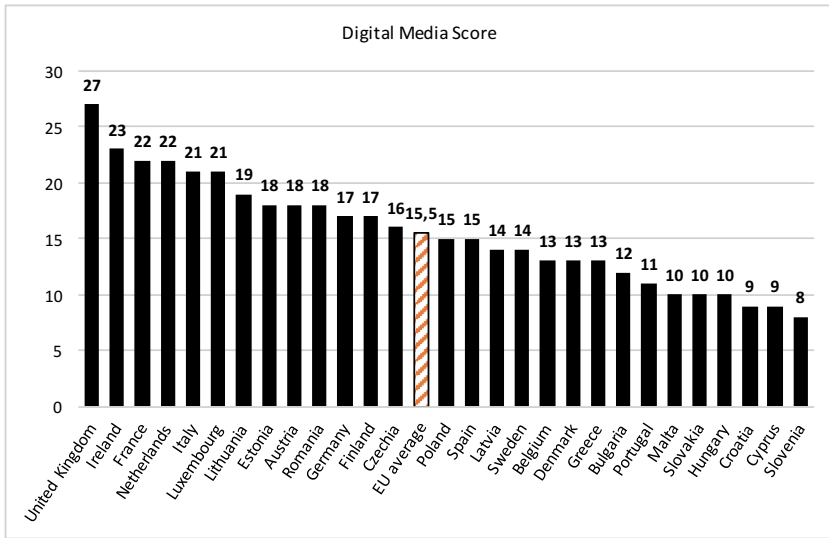
The list of digital media applications we considered follows previous studies such as Hoffman (2012), and was employed in Schwanholz and Busch (2016). We distinguished between unidirectional and multidirectional digital media applications, as shown in Table 1. To generate our dataset, we queried the websites of national parliaments of all EU member states twice: first in January 2015, and then again in December 2016. We searched the websites in their original language for links and/or references to the applications in our list. Luckily, the language barrier constitutes less of a problem in this case because online applications are often referred to by their original English label, even on foreign-language websites. This is especially the case for branded platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Where our initial search was unsuccessful, we relied on machine translations of the website in question; could the application still not be found, it was coded as missing. The unit of analysis thus is the individual parliamentary website, with scores ranging from 0 (no digital media applications were found) to a maximum of 28 (all tools were found, and functioning).

**Tab. 1** Digital and social media tools and their dimensionality

<b>Dimension of communication</b>	<b>Online application</b>
<i>Unidirectional</i>	Audio files / podcasts
	Electronic newsletter
	Information video
	RSS feed
	Virtual tour
	Website application
	Web TV
<i>Multidirectional</i>	Email or contact form
	Facebook
	Photo sharing (Flickr / Instagram)
	Google+
	Twitter
<i>Depending on application</i>	YouTube
	Other

Source: own compilation.

We thoroughly searched the websites for the tools listed above, and subsequently ranked parliaments on their digital media use. We extended the approach of previous studies (such as Schwanholz and Busch 2016) by not only coding the incidence of applications as dichotomous, but ordinal. Could a tool not be found on a website at all, we assigned a value of 0. Was a tool offered, but its functionality was impaired, we assigned a value of 1. This includes situations such as links or buttons not leading to the desired application; the necessity to install a browser plugin before the tool could be accessed; or a redirect to an external website, thus not allowing access to the application on the parliamentary website itself. Where an application was correctly integrated into the website, and fully functioning, we assigned a value of 2. We searched for 14 distinct digital media applications – if all these were used and functioning properly, a website scored the maximum value of 28. Figure 3 shows the results of the most recent query in December 2016.



**Fig. 3** Digital media score by parliament

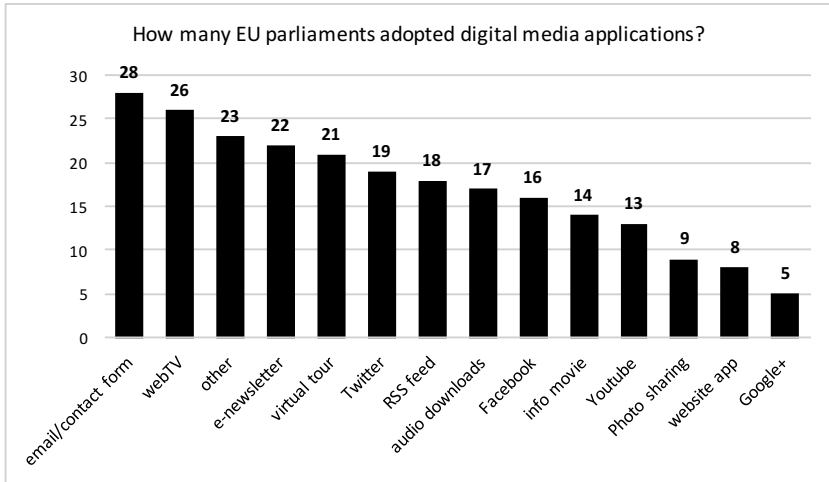
Source: own data, website queries in Dec 2016.

## 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Despite the numerous similarities between EU member states and their political systems, we find a surprising amount of variation in parliaments’ digital media use. No institution reaches the maximum score of 28 – the United Kingdom ranks highest with a score of 27, with one point deducted for the app associated with the parliament’s website not functioning properly at the time of review. Behind the UK, five further states score above 20, from Ireland’s *Dáil Éireann* to the French *Assemblée Nationale*, to Luxembourg’s *D’Chamber*. At the other end of the spectrum, we find several states in Southeast Europe – Croatia, Cyprus, and Slovenia – that register scores only in the single digits. The Slovenian parliament has little to offer besides a virtual tour and an email contact form; WebTV and audio downloads were linked, but did not appear to function. In between these extremes, the distribution shows an even falloff above and below the EU average of 15.5 points, with no obvious patterns.

Because we generate an index, states reach their scores through different configurations of digital media tools – there are some applications that have been

universally adopted, while others are more niche products. Figure 4 shows the number of parliaments that have adopted individual tools in our sample.

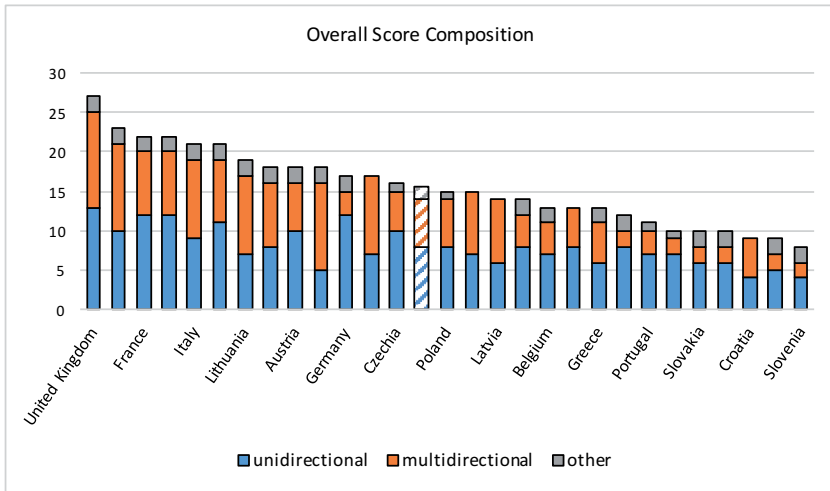


**Fig. 4** Applications adopted by number of countries

Source: own data, website queries in Dec 2016. Values indicate number of EU parliaments that employ a specific tool on their websites.

Providing email addresses or other contact forms was the only digital media tool embraced by all 28 parliaments. Streaming parliamentary debates were a close second, and offered by all states except for Lithuania and Cyprus, even though not all webTV applications were functioning properly. Periodic electronic newsletters and virtual tours were other popular tools. Google+ was the least popular platform, and is only employed in a fully working version by the UK, France, and Romania. Together with a dedicated website app, the photo sharing platform Flickr, and a YouTube channel, Google+ was offered by a minority of parliaments; all other applications were being used by a majority.

Expanding on the question of the composition of parliaments' overall scores, we separated unidirectional applications from multidirectional ones. The results are shown in Figure 5.

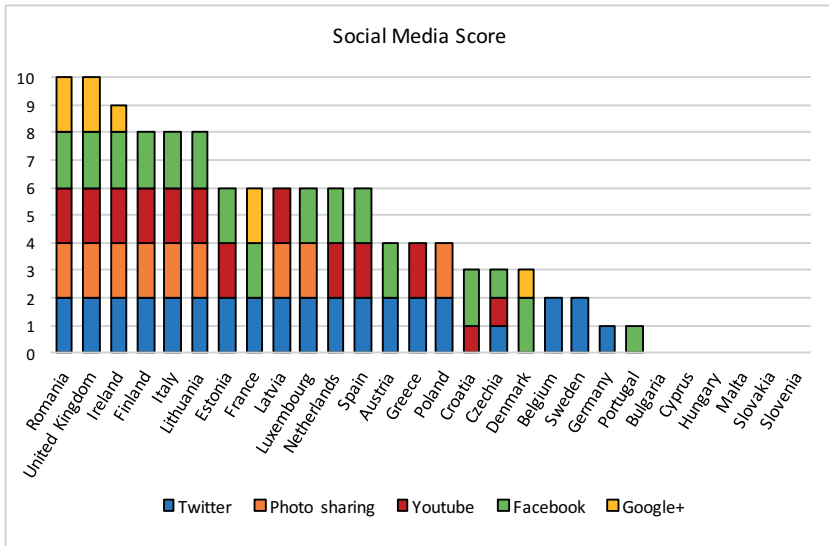


**Fig. 5** Score composition by country

Source: own data, website queries in December 2016. Overall digital media scores shown.

Parliaments show roughly equal use of both types of tools. On average, they score 8 of 14 points on unidirectional applications, and 6 of 12 points on multidirectional applications. The countries at the top of the list generally utilize both dimensions, but there two notable cases among the remaining states. The German *Bundestag* seems to be especially fond of unidirectional applications, and receives 12 of its 17 points from this category, but only scores 3 multidirectional points. On the other hand, Romania scores almost identically overall, but generates 11 of these off multidirectional social media applications, and only 5 points from more traditional unidirectional tools.

To tease out more clearly the variation in the use of social media applications, we took a closer look at the use of Facebook, Flickr/Instagram, Google+, Twitter, and YouTube. Figure 6 shows the scores only for these social networks across countries.



**Fig. 6** Social media score by country

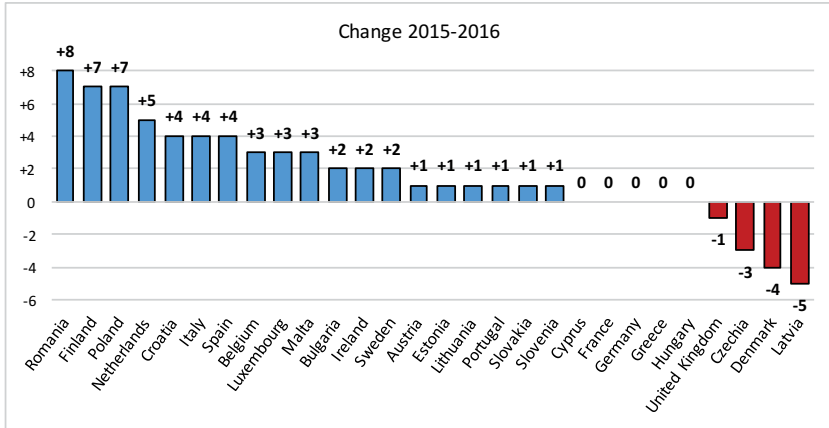
Source: own data, website queries in Dec 2016. Social media components of overall score shown. 2 points per application, maximum = 10 points.

Not surprisingly, the UK parliament leads the remainder of the EU in social media strategy. Yet it is not the only parliament scoring maximum points on social media use: Romania also utilizes every social tool at its disposal, from Facebook to photo sharing. The websites of Ireland, Finland, Italy, and Lithuania occupy the subsequent positions, each offering four social media applications except for Google+. Six of the 28 parliamentary websites – all of them located in Southeast Europe – did not offer any social media integration. Twitter was the most commonly used tool, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr/Instagram.

### 4.3 Temporal Variation: 2015-2016

The internet and digital media are inherently fast moving, and their use evolves quickly. Having previously surveyed parliamentary websites in January 2015 (see Theiner et al. 2018), we updated the data for this project in December 2016. To our surprise, comparing both snapshots showed significant changes even in the

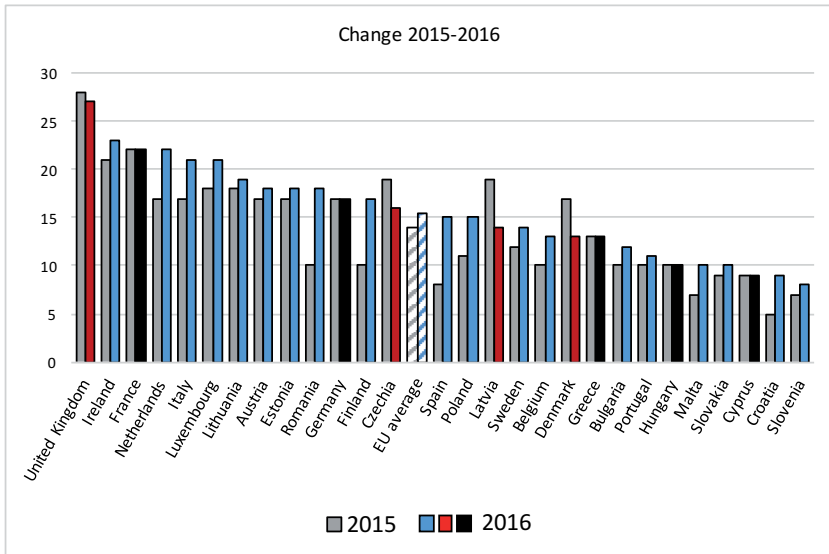
space of less than 24 months. These changes mostly point towards a direction of augmentation, but there were some notable reductions. Figure 7 gives an overview of these changes.



**Fig. 7** Change in overall scores between 2015 and 2016

Source: own data, website queries in January 2015 and December 2016.

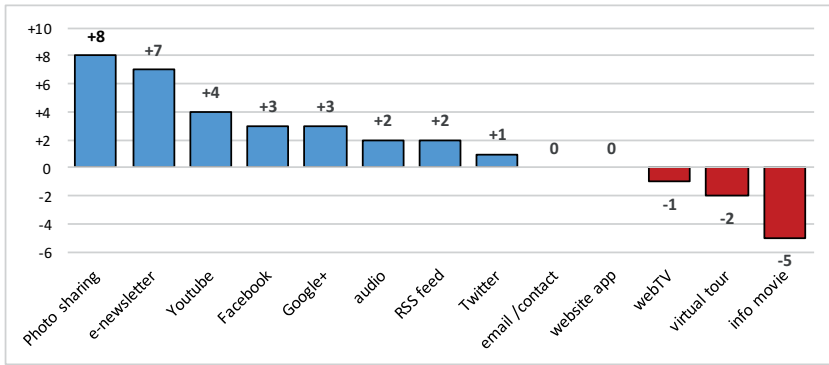
Most notably, the Romanian *Parlamentul* redesigned large parts of its online presence, with special emphasis on the use of social media. In the space of less than two years, it gained 8 points overall, and jumped from rank 22 of 28 countries to number 10. Almost of the same magnitude are the changes made by Finland and Poland. However, there are some states that have fallen behind, such as Czechia, Denmark, and Latvia. The latter removed its livestreaming capability and some “other” applications, and no longer has an active Facebook presence. Because it lost 5 points while others improved their digital media use, Latvia fell from position 5 among all EU member states to position 16. This shows not only how rapidly parliaments can make improvements in their online interactions with citizens, but also that efforts at continued innovation are required to not fall behind. There is no evidence to suggest that the trend towards rising overall standards in the EU will slow down or even reverse course. Figure 8 compares parliaments’ scores in 2015 with those in 2016.



**Fig. 8** Change in overall scores between January 2015 and December 2016

Source: own data, website queries in January 2015 and December 2016. Gray = 2015 score; blue = increase in 2016, red = decrease, black = no change.

Has the overall increase in digital media use come on the back of specific applications? And have others fallen out of favor? To answer these questions, we compared the points scored across all countries for each of our applications (see Figure 9). Among all tools in our dataset, photo sharing has seen the largest increase in use among parliaments – such applications have become extremely popular across all social media platforms, and legislative bodies seem to follow this trend. In second place, electronic newsletters have spread widely, followed by accounts on YouTube, Facebook, and Google+. In comparison, some more traditional digital media applications, such as virtual tours and informational films hosted on the parliament website itself, seem to slowly fall out of favor.



**Fig. 9** Change between 2015 and 2016 in points scored across all countries, by tool

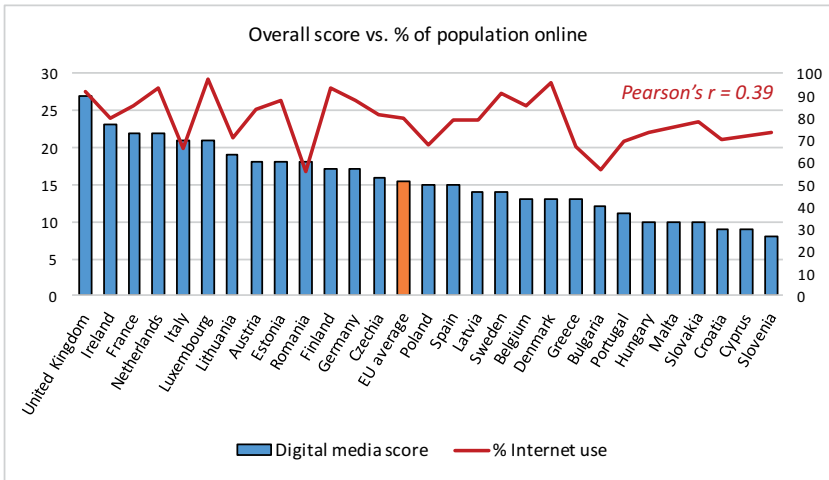
Source: own data, website queries in Jan 2015 and Dec 2016. Values show sum of points gained across all countries for specific application.

#### 4.4 Covariation and Explanatory Factors

How can we explain variation across EU parliaments? In the following section, we explore possible explanatory factors by looking at covariation; with 28 cases, more demanding statistical procedures are not feasible.

First, the obvious hypothesis is that patterns of digital media use by parliaments merely mirror how widespread their use is among the population of their respective countries. Where most citizens are online, these will also have the expectation that their parliament is making greater use of digital media. Additionally, the reach of information distributed by parliament through digital channels is greater when more citizens are online. This in turn incentivizes parliaments to use online tools to engage with their constituents. As shown in Figure 10, we do find substantial support for this hypothesis. While there are some outliers whose scores are explained poorly by the percentage of internet users, the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.39 ( $p < 0.05$ ), meaning we can explain around 15% of the variation in overall scores solely through states' proportion of internet users among their populations.

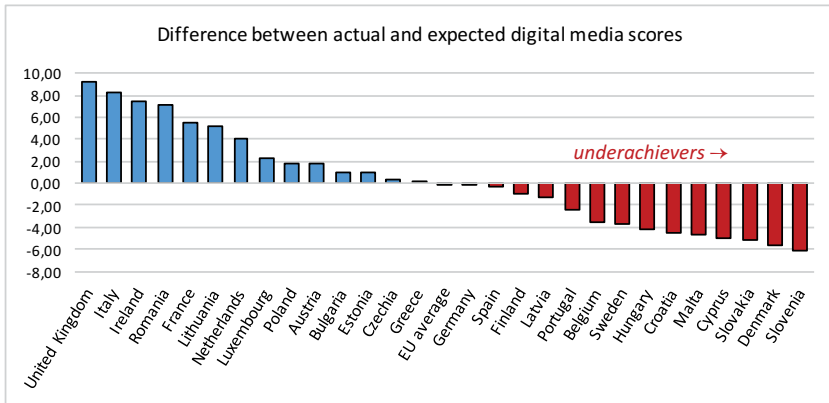
Using this data, we can identify 'overachievers' and 'underachievers' among EU member states. Assuming for the moment the relationship between parliaments' digital media scores and the percentage of citizens online was perfectly linear, we can relate the average internet user percentage across the EU (80%) to the average digital media score (15.5). In this hypothetical average state, one point scored corresponds to  $80 / 15.5 = 5.2\%$  of a state's population being online.



**Fig. 10** Overall score vs. percentage of state's population online

Source: own data, website queries in Dec 2016. Online population: Eurostat

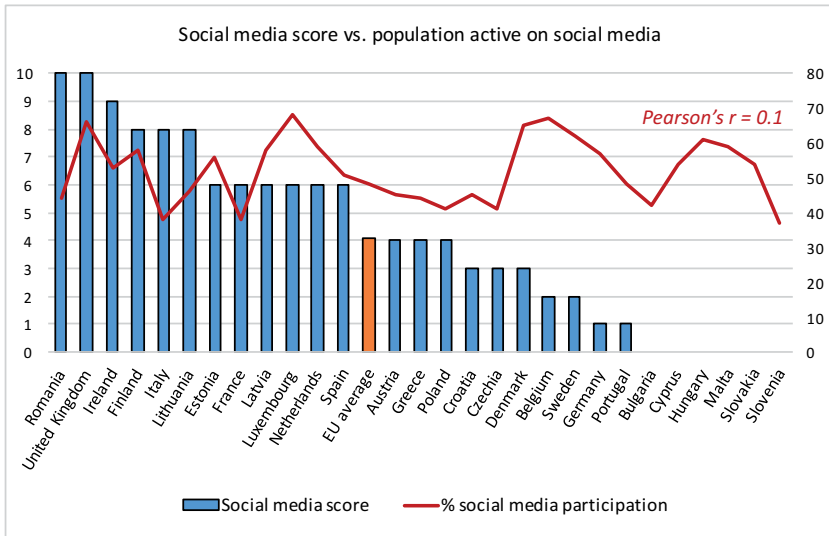
Dividing the actual proportion of the population which is online in the dataset by 5.2 thus gives us an expected digital media score, which we can compare to the actual score. Positive values in Figure 11 indicate that a parliament has received a higher score than its online population would lead us to expect, the reverse is true for negative scores. The United Kingdom's *Houses of Parliament* is the biggest overachiever in the sample, mostly based on its extremely high digital media score. The Western European parliaments of Italy, Ireland, and France are also making greater efforts at digital engagement than we would have expected. Notably, several Eastern European parliaments are also overachieving, above all Romania, but also Lithuania, Poland, and Bulgaria. On the underachieving side, we find states with large proportions of their populations online, but whose parliaments have been slow to digitize (Belgium, Sweden, Denmark), together with states with low internet penetration but even lower digital media scores for their parliaments (Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia). Notably absent is a simple geographic pattern: Eastern and Western European states can be found on both ends of the spectrum, and the same is true for Northern and Southern Europe.



**Fig. 11** Actual digital media scores vs. expected based on % of population online  
 Source: own calculation.

Next, we took a closer look at the multidirectional social media component of our overall index. Much like in the analysis above, the initial expectation would be that a parliament’s social media use should be positively correlated with the social media use of its citizens – where a large share of citizens use Twitter, Facebook, and other networks, parliaments can be expected to use these same channels to communicate with their people. However, we find very little evidence in our dataset to support this hypothesis. As can be seen in Figure 12, what percentage of the general population is ‘active’ on social networks (creation of profiles, posting on Twitter, etc.) has little to do with whether a parliament uses the same digital media tools – Pearson’s  $r$  is only 0.1 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

While some of the highest scoring parliaments do indeed correspond to a population active on social media – such as the UK and Finland – we find two significant deviations from a supposed linear relationship. The first are parliaments that are very much present and active on social media, but who are ahead of their own citizens. Romania is an especially strong outlier in this regard: its parliamentary website uses every single social media tool at its disposal, yet Romania has one of the EU’s lowest rates of social media adoption among citizens (44 %). Italy is a further social media overachiever, with its parliament receiving 8 points for the use of tools that only 38 % of Italians employ themselves.



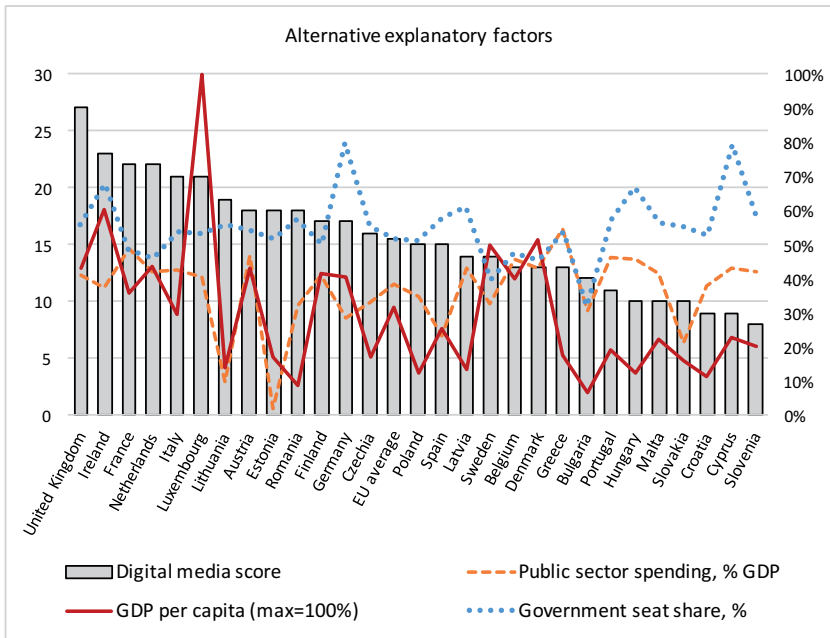
**Fig. 12** Social media scores vs. % of state's population participating in social media

Source: own data, website queries in Dec 2016. Social media participation: Eurostat. Participation shown in % of population 'active' on social media.

The second deviation corresponds to a much larger group of parliaments that seem to care very little about their presence on social media, despite the interest and participation of their citizens. Again, there is no geographical pattern: Belgium and Hungary both have some of the EU's highest citizen participation in social media, but this interest has yet to filter through to parliaments. The Belgian *Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers* only offers an official Twitter account, while Hungary's *Országgyűlés* does not have a social media presence at all. Sweden's *Riksdag* is only active on Twitter, in a country where more than 60% of users are active on social networks. Economic and demographic heavyweight Germany's *Bundestag* seems to own a Twitter account, but does not post updates.

The surprising variation between parliaments, coupled with the significant number of outliers when attempting to explain this variation through states' online populations, led us to examine three alternative explanatory factors: GDP per capita; public sector spending as a percentage of GDP; and the combined seat share of all government parties. GDP per capita is a rough measure of economic power and the availability of resources, including those of the public sector. On average, we would

expect more prosperous EU member states to be able to dedicate more resources to their parliaments’ digital media infrastructure and upkeep, and consequently achieve higher scores. Looking at public sector spending as a percentage of GDP expands on the importance of public resources for parliamentary communication strategies. Where public spending constitutes a larger share of national GDP, parliaments should be able to translate their greater resources into higher scores. Lastly, we looked at the combined seat share of all parties in government in a state’s legislative body. Our hypothesis is that a lower governmental seat share indicates a more competitive parliament. Parliaments that feature a high degree of competition between parties can be assumed to have a greater incentive to communicate the structure and content of this competitive environment to their citizens. Figure 13 shows the results.



**Fig. 13** Alternative explanatory factors

Source: own data. Public spending, GDP: World Bank. Seats: Database of Political Institutions. Note: GDP per capita normalized for graphical purposes, with highest value in the EU set to 100%.

GDP per capita (at constant 2015 US\$) is indeed highly correlated with parliaments' digital media scores – in fact, Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.5 is significantly higher than for measures of internet usage ( $p < 0.05$ ). A country's economic prowess seems to be strongly indicative of its parliament's digital strategy, with richer countries systematically making greater efforts and scoring higher on our digital media index. However, we find little evidence for the other two possible explanatory factors. Public sector spending is negatively correlated with digital media scores, and with only  $-0.09$ , the size of the coefficient is less a fifth of GDP per capita (although significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, governmental seat shares as a proxy for legislative competitiveness explain only a small part of the variation in the dependent variable. With a correlation coefficient of  $-0.08$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), more competitive parliaments are indeed more likely to receive a higher digital media score: the higher the government's seat share, the lower the score. In sum, the independent variable with the least direct causal path to parliaments' online strategies – GDP per capita – shows the highest covariation.

As a last step and to guard against spurious correlations, we combined all explanatory variables in a linear regression intended to explain overall media scores. Note that due to the low  $n$  in combination with the large number of independent variables, we do not expect significant results.

**Tab. 1** Regression results

Variable	Coefficient
% of population online	0.08 (0.13)
% of population social media active	-0.18 (0.12)
Public spending as % of GDP	-9.54 (7.52)
GDP per capita	1.45** (0.63)
% seat share of executive in parliament	-0.72 (8.29)
(Intercept)	17.94 (9.83)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.36

*Results of linear regression model explaining overall digital media scores. Standard errors in parentheses. GDP per capita rescaled by dividing by 10,000.*

The results (Table 2) do not substantially contradict earlier interpretations. Notably, GDP per capita is statistically significant despite the limitations of the regression approach. This underlines the importance of overall prosperity in explaining parliamentary media strategies mentioned above.

In summary, we find that both unidirectional and multidirectional communication tools have undergone – and are still undergoing – a rapid proliferation. This holds true even when considering that our study revisited parliamentary websites less than two years after the initial survey. However, this proliferation is not evenly distributed across EU member states: while parliaments in Romania and Finland have dramatically increased their online engagement to a point where they are actually outperforming their own citizens, others such as Denmark and Latvia are lagging in their use of digital media when compared to their populations. Six of 28 EU parliaments still do not use social networks at all, while a further four only use one service.

The overall results show some clear frontrunners like the UK, Ireland, and France, an evenly distributed midfield, and a cluster of countries in Southeastern Europe scoring comparatively poorly. We also find evidence for a diversification of parliamentary strategies in terms of digital media use. The ‘fast risers’ among parliaments, chief among them Romania, gained most of their points through employing social media tools, rather than improving the use of more traditional unidirectional applications. The service seeing the most dramatic usage increase is social photo sharing through Instagram or Flickr. While this mirrors the meteoric rise of these platforms among all users, it also shows the allure of content that is relatively easy to produce, even as its substantive depth is limited.

What explains differences in digital media use by parliaments? The degree of correlation between overall digital media scores and a nation’s online population is reasonably high, but the relationship is less strong for social media applications, where some parliaments seem to outpace their constituents. Interestingly, our findings show that parliaments make the most extensive use of social media where the levels of trust in parliament are especially low (see Gabriel 2008, p. 207). Among alternative explanations, the highest degree of correlation with overall scores was shown by GDP per capita, with more prosperous EU states making greater use of digital media strategies. We found little support for alternative explanations based on either the availability of public resources (public sector spending) or the varying degree of competition in surveyed parliaments (government seat share).

## 5 Conclusion

How has the digital transformation that affects all of society impacted on parliaments? That was the question this chapter attempts to answer by looking at the communication function of parliaments. Parliaments, as previous studies have shown, use digital and social media to communicate with citizens and absolve themselves of their information duties which are central if a lively and participatory democracy is to ensue. However, as our surveys show, this use differs substantially across countries as well as over time. We thus face an obviously dynamic situation. Nevertheless, this calls for at least an attempt at explaining the variations.

In our attempt at explanation we have focused on social and political variables located on the macrosocial level. Due to the low number of cases, we limited ourselves to an analysis of covariation and only tentatively offered a combination of variables in a regression analysis. A high percentage of population online and overall prosperity as measured by GDP per capita emerge as the most robust predictors of the degree to which a country's parliament pursues an elaborate digital media strategy. But as our descriptive parts have demonstrated, substantial variation is present across EU members states and over time which indicates that a future replication of our survey may see the picture changed. We therefore hope to either return to the subject again in the future or see our colleagues do so.

What this study could not evaluate was the extent to which parliaments are able to maintain and regularly update their applications, once they have been set up. Static content might be appropriate to convey basic information about institutional structures and processes. But parliaments can only properly engage with citizens, answer questions, and keep constituents informed of current developments – in other words, to better fulfill parliament's role in societal integration – when they continuously invest in their digital media channels. One dilemma that our data hints at is the possible tradeoff between easily updated, cheap content with limited depth such as photo sharing, which encourages wide, but shallow engagement; and resource-intensive applications promoting deeper interactions between parliaments and a smaller number of their citizens, such as professionally produced videos or podcasts. The temporal comparison certainly shows that multidimensional ways of communicating are on the rise among parliaments.

## Appendix

**Table 1** Codebook

Application	Code	Score
RSS feed	Available	2
	Not available	0
Electronic newsletter	Can be subscribed via email	2
	Can be subscribed via text message	2
	Available online on website or as downloadable document (PDF)	1
	Not available	0
Website app	Available	2
	Not available	0
Web TV	Available	2
	Available, but displays error message or additional plugin notification	1
	Link available, but cannot be loaded / displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Email	General information email, speaker, secretariat, specific department	2
	Website administrator email	1
	Link to emails of politicians or staff	1
	Not available	0
Contact form	Available for general inquiries or complaints	2
	Available for specific purposes (e.g. requests for visits)	1
	Not available	0
Twitter	Active Twitter account	2
	Button for sharing website or contents on Twitter	1
	Button and link to parliamentarians' Twitter accounts	1
	Not available	0
Flickr / Instagram	Available	2
	Not available	0
YouTube	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded / displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Facebook	Active Facebook account	2
	Button for sharing website or contents on Facebook	1
	Button and link to parliamentarians' Facebook accounts	1
	Not available	0
Google+	Available	2
	Not available	0

e-petition	Available	2
	Petition can be signed online, but has to be delivered as hardcopy	1
	Link available, but cannot be loaded / displayed properly	1
	Delivery via email possible	2
	Not available	0
Information video	General information about parliament	2
	Information for children and teenagers / specific information	2
	Not available	0
Virtual tour	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded / displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Audio recordings	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded / displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Other	Other communication tools available	2
	Passive, ambiguous	1
	Nothing else available	0





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