

Reactions to Juncker's State of the Union speech show the difficulties in creating a European public sphere online

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Can platforms like Twitter facilitate the creation of a European public sphere? Based on an analysis of tweets during Jean-Claude Juncker's 'State of the Union 2016' speech, [Javier Ruiz-Soler](#) outlines how Twitter can be conceived of as a 'networked public sphere' in which citizens have the potential to engage in a more democratic and participative form of political conversation. He finds little evidence for a genuine public sphere existing in relation to the speech, but suggests that other topics can generate more heterogeneous networks, with civil society and independent actors playing a greater role.



The internet has opened up new possibilities for people to interact, most notably through social media. In the European context, a [recent EUROPP article](#) by Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz has illustrated how conversations in a particular national sphere can become 'Europeanised' and used across several countries. But there is still insufficient knowledge about how these networks operate and their wider effects on citizens and public conversations.

To assess this issue, I have explored the use of Twitter hashtags with links to issues that are of relevance to Europe. The hashtags I chose to select in doing this were not only of European relevance, but were also multilingual. Such hashtags can be used for conversations that cut across different groups of people in different countries at the same time.

I took as my starting point the concept of the '[networked public sphere](#)', which has been developed by Yochai Benkler. The main argument put forward by Benkler is that contrary to traditional networks which can be dominated by the mass media and political institutions, a networked public sphere provides room for other actors (including NGOs, think tanks, and regular individuals) to make their voices heard. Benkler argues that the decentralised individual action facilitated by these networks allows for a more democratic and participative form of political communication than was previously possible.

Twitter offers an interesting example of this kind of networked public sphere. Online platforms in general are natural arenas for the kind of conversations Benkler identifies due to their structure and horizontal hierarchy. Moreover, the transnational nature of Twitter and the availability of clear data via tweets, retweets, mentions and hashtags, makes it an ideal object of study, particularly given the level of openness on the platform in comparison to other alternatives.

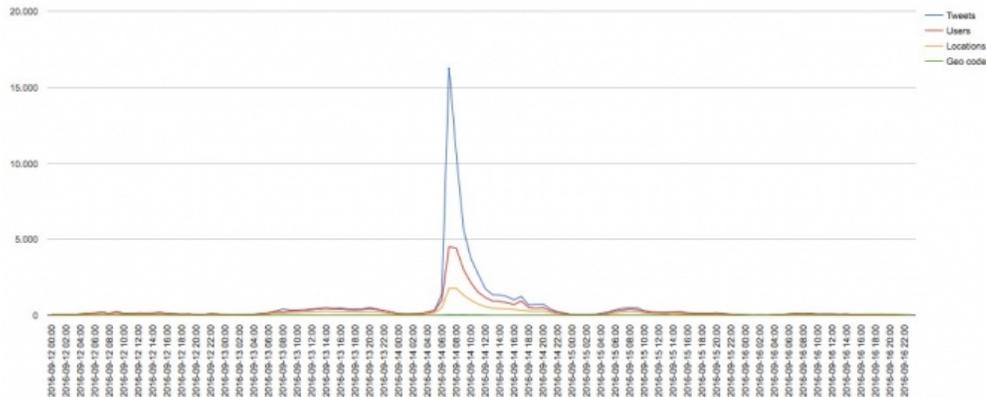
So how does the networked public sphere approach match up to the reality of the social media networks that exist in Europe today? The recent 'State of the Union' speech made by Jean-Claude Juncker on 14 September, which was discussed under the hashtag #soteu, provides a good illustration of how conversations can be shaped online. The hashtag itself, incidentally, was created (at least according to [Jon Worth](#)) by bloggers who conducted an annual '[bullshit bingo](#)' during the speech, before it was picked up and made 'official' by the EU's communications team.

Using a [TCAT platform](#), I was able to collect a total of 59,433 tweets on 14 September. It should be noted that this approach has some [limitations](#) – it is possible that due to the way the data is collected, other people may have acquired slightly different results depending on the time period covered and the exact software used. However, the data nevertheless gives a general indication of the tweets that were made in relation to the speech.

The first observation that can be made from this data is that when we look at the days either side of the speech, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, we can see that despite the obvious spike in activity on 14 September, the #soteu

hashtag is barely used for the rest of the year. Typically, there were no more than a couple of tweets per month in the period leading up to the speech and some of these were not even related to the speech itself.

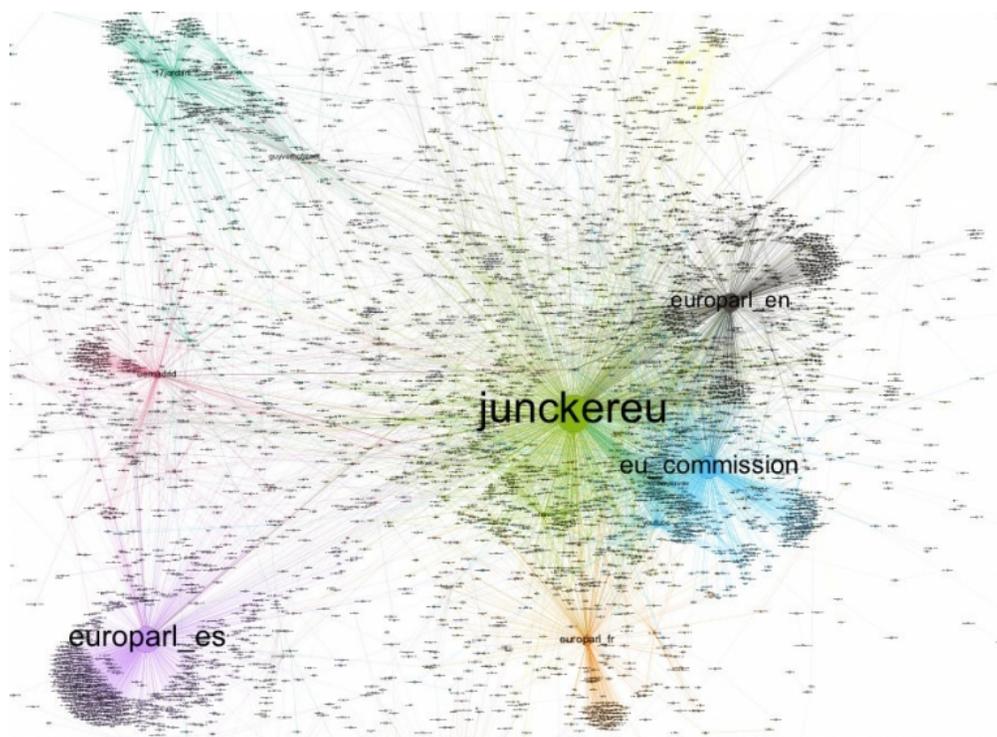
Figure 1: Evolution of tweets using the #soteu hashtag in the leadup to the 2016 speech on 14 September



Note: The image can be enlarged by clicking on it.

Second, we can illustrate the networks that exist based on interactions between users. If users mention each other, a direct link is created. The more often one user mentions another, the stronger the link. Mapping this kind of network can show us the possible communities that may be formed among users, as well as their level of interaction. Figure 2 below presents such an image, where each colour represents a distinct 'community' and users are seen as divided between these communities based on how they interact with one another.

Figure 2: Map of social networks based on Twitter mentions



Note: The image can be enlarged by clicking on it.

The evidence here suggests that users had a greater tendency to refer consistently to four specific Twitter accounts (@juckereu, @europarl_es, @europarl_en, @eu_comission), rather than interact directly with one another. These users acted as what might be termed ‘relay stations’, relaying the messages produced by these four accounts – such as in [this tweet](#) by European Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen. This may contribute to the spread of information through personal Twitter networks, but there is little apparent conversation between users or across different groups and communities.

The importance of each node (or user) within a network is also significant. Certain Twitter accounts have a highly important role in spreading information throughout a network and it is possible to measure this by calculating a ‘between-ness score’ that captures the significance of individual users for the wider network. Removing these users altogether, for instance, may result in a network fragmenting into several smaller networks. The table below presents this picture for the networks above, ranking Twitter accounts by their relative importance to the networks they reside in.

Table: The importance of Twitter accounts for networks derived from the #soteu hashtag

<i>Twitter account</i>	<i>Type of account</i>	<i>‘Between-ness score’</i>
europarl_en	EU Institution	21.11
theprogressives	Political Party	21.00
kgeorgievaeu	EU Politician	19.70
eu_commission	EU Institution	19.48
greensep	Political Party	18.41
anagomesmep	Politician	17.09
be_herrero	Journalist	15.04
janalbrecht	Politician	14.91
rebharms	Politician	14.58
euractiv	Media	13.19
jef_europe	NGO	13.02
politicoryan	Journalist	12.85
jduch	Politician	12.57
youth_forum	NGO	12.53
gioianniello	Citizen	12.13
giannipittella	Politician	11.74
jefbelgium	NGO	10.72
mjrodrigueseu	Politician	10.28
margschinas	Politician	9.82
euractivsk	Media	9.07

Note: The ‘between-ness score’ (referred to as ‘between-ness centrality’) has been rounded to two decimal places from the raw number for ease of reference.

In the table we can see that the most important accounts by this measure were those of political institutions and the media. We have to drop all the way to the 11th position in the table to find an account from civil society. The

networked public sphere approach suggests that actors outside of the media and politics can acquire greater importance for political communication; yet in the case of the #soteu Twitter network, this does not appear to be the case in practice. This is in line with [other analyses](#) of the #soteu hashtag, which indicate a general lack of interest about the speech and a general dominance within the network of political institutions and politicians.

Ultimately, while there may be an opportunity for a European networked public sphere to develop via platforms like Twitter, there is little evidence for this in the #soteu case. A lack of interaction between users and the domination of traditional political actors within the network are both apparent in the data. While there are indeed some citizens, NGOs and think tanks represented in the table above, there are very low on the ranking and therefore carry less importance.

And perhaps this should be expected given the nature of the topic. The State of the Union speech is a highly specialised affair, with only those who hold a strong interest in EU politics likely to make comments about it online. It is also distinctly unpopular, not only in the sense that other topics generate more discussion, but also in the sense that it is only discussed for one of 365 days.

But more popular and diverse European topics on Twitter have exhibited a greater degree of heterogeneity in the associated networks, with civil society and independent actors playing a greater role. Assessing these networks is important for understanding the new forms of political communication that now exist and the effect these methods of communication can have in shaping political outcomes. There may be little evidence for it in the State of the Union speech, but if there is to be the emergence of a European public sphere then Twitter seems one of the most likely places for it to begin.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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