European Integration online Papers ISSN 1027-5193

Special Issue 1, Vol. 17 (2013), Article 4

How to cite?

Busby, Amy and Kheira Belkacem (2013):'"Coping with the information overload": An exploration of assistants' backstage role in the everyday practice of European Parliament politics', in: Ripoll Servent, Ariadna and Amy Busby (eds): 'Agency and influence inside the EU institutions', *European Integration online Papers (EIoP)*, Special Issue 1, Vol. 17, Article 4, http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2013-004a.htm, pp. 1-28.

DOI: 10.1695/2013004

"Coping with the information overload": An exploration of assistants' backstage role in the everyday practice of European Parliament politics

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Abstract: The Lisbon Treaty further empowered the European Parliament (EP) and expanded its competence into new legislative areas. This has increased the workload of individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Empirical evidence suggests they can feel they are suffering from "information overload" due to the increased workload, highly technical nature of EU legislation, and volume of daily communications they receive. This paper explores the role of assistants in helping MEPs to cope with this information overloaded work environment with an exploratory, descriptive, and interdisciplinary approach. Ethnographic research (including observation in three MEP offices) has been conducted.

We argue that assistants play an important and yet under-estimated role in the everyday practice of politics inside the institution. As well as participating in the legislative process themselves, assistants play a key role in providing MEPs with information to make decisions and give credible and thus persuasive frontstage performances. These hidden actors therefore affect individual MEPs' capacity to exert influence. This influence is achieved through the information 'interface' mechanism. We argue that assistants act as an information 'interface' within the MEP office and therefore play a part in MEPs' decision-making process and practice of politics. This ethnographic paper explores *how* they do this; assistants 'filter' information and provide 'tailored' information to MEPs. We discuss why the assistants are important, who they are and what they do, their role as information 'interfaces', their sources

of information, communication practices, and we highlight the importance of information sharing within national party delegations. This study sheds light on backstage dynamics and provides a deeper understanding of the role of these hidden actors in MEPs' decision-making, everyday practice of politics, and ability to successfully exert influence.

Keywords: European Parliament; MEPs; knowledge; sociology.

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Introduction

> 'Seeing how much work there is for the MEPs, it is very hard to imagine one person managing all of it on their own. The amount of work that the assistants put in to make sure that the MEP is informed and organised is crucial for allowing the MEP to make educated decisions' (Respondent-6, Question-14[1]).

The Lisbon Treaty further empowered the European Parliament (EP) by extending the co-decision procedure and expanding its competence into new legislative fields. Some scholars have begun to ask how the EP will adapt and rise to these new powers and fulfil its legislative role, a key question being where MEPs will get the information required to make decisions

[1] Question 14:" What do you think makes a good MEP?".

(Neuhold and Dobbels 2012). As one of the observed MEPs walked into his office, he declared with some exasperation – with an armful of papers and blackberry in hand – that he felt *we are suffering from information overload here*, (Obs 1) expressing a sentiment also raised by other interviewees. This information overload is due to the Lisbon Treaty increasing active MEPs' already heavy legislative workload, the highly technical nature of EU legislation, high volume of information MEP offices receive every day, and the growing means through which communications can be sent.

Through ethnographic fieldwork, this article goes backstage into three MEPs' offices to explore one way in which MEPs cope with this information overloaded work environment to perform their role. This article highlights the important and (so far) largely under-estimated role MEPs' assistants play in the everyday practice of politics inside the EP. As well as participating in the legislative process themselves, we argue that assistants play a vital role inside this institution by providing MEPs with information to make decisions and practice politics. These hidden actors thus affect individual MEPs' capacity to exert influence in processes occurring inside this black-box through the information 'interface' mechanism. We argue that assistants play a central and essential information management role in MEP offices, acting as information 'interfaces'. Firstly, they play a 'gate-keeping' role between their MEP and the actors who want to contact them, helping to decide who gains access. Secondly, they manage information in the office by 'filtering' out unwanted communications and providing 'tailored' information to the MEPs. Through these everyday practices, assistants play a role in MEPs' everyday decision-making process, help them prepare to give credible frontstage performances to persuade other actors, and thus affect their capacity to practice politics successfully and pursue their aims and visions and exert influence. By exploring assistants' everyday activities, sources of information, and communication practices, we also investigate where the information they regularly provide their MEPs with comes from. The added value this ethnographic study provides is that it reveals the previously missed *extent* of assistants' influence on their MEPs' capacity to exert influence. This is achieved through the taken-for-granted daily office routines and practices which are explored in this paper.

This exploratory and inter-disciplinary article combines tools and insights from political science, anthropology, and communication studies. First, we review the literature and develop the rationale. Then the ethnographic methodology and theoretical framework based on Goffman's frontstage-backstage distinction are introduced. The empirical sections then explore why the assistants are important, who they are and what they do, their role as information 'interfaces', their information sources, and communication practices. This paper contributes to this Special Issue and the wider literature by shining light onto backstage dynamics and getting closer to these hidden actors to provide a deeper understanding of MEPs' decision-making, everyday practice of EP politics, and ability to exert influence.

1. Research design

1.1. Background and rationale

The EP's powers have been gradually and continuously enhanced and it is now widely acknowledged as a mainstream EU player. The EP's empowerment through co-decision means the EU now has 'what amounts to a bicameral legislature' (Corbett et al. 2011: 397). The EP attracted increasing academic interest as its powers grew (Hix et al. 2003: 192; Scully 2007) and as their influence grew, attention turned to the MEPs and their behaviour (Blomgren 2003: 5; Noury 2002: 34). Quantitative studies of roll call votes [RCVs] have repeatedly told us that the EP should be approached as a 'normal' parliament because the political groups are the best predictors of voting behaviour and vote increasingly cohesively (Hix et al. 2007; McElroy 2006: 179; Ringe 2010). Studies have also highlighted the important role national party delegations (NPDs) play inside the groups, operating to make them act cohesively (Hix et al. 2007: 146; Yordanova 2011). Other scholars have taken innovative approaches such as social network analysis to understand legislative negotiations and specialization in the EP (Jensen and Winzen 2012). Despite the significant body of statistical work which exists, former Secretary-General Julian Priestley has lamented that 'there is relatively little on the life of the Parliament' (2008: xi). Whilst RCV behaviour has been modelled and refined, we still know surprisingly little about the everyday practice of politics by actors inside the institution beyond RCVs and *how* MEPs make decisions, exert influence, and perform their role(s) (Busby 2013; Ringe 2010). The literature lacks studies which take a more sociological approach to agency and actors and their activities inside EU structures and dynamics occurring between structures and agents, as has been outlined in this Special Issue's introduction (Favell and Guiraudon 2011; Jenson and Mérand 2010; Kauppi 2011).

This paper takes a broader approach to MEP behaviour as the everyday performance of politics by actors within an institutional space, and explores this with ethnography (Wodak 2009). Thinking more sociologically means exploring the practices of actors in European spaces and we explore the activities of assistants within the MEP office space. Jenson and Mérand say research has been 'too distant' from EU actors while Medrano suggests sociologists have neglected the EU because they do not see a society at the European level (2006 in Jenson and Mérand 2010: 74–80). However, like Abélès, we found 'a closed world with its own codes and ways of doing things' (1993: 1). As Bellier said of ethnographic research in the Commission:

> 'Observing concrete social and cultural relations are doubtlessly much more efficient in terms of the quality of the data collected than trying to justify a pre-established model of interaction or administrative science that would have been set without knowing any of the social conditions that are part of the institution's life' (Bellier 2002: 16).

1.2. Methodology

This ethnographic study is part of a new generation of research investigating EU actors and informality with qualitative methods and empirical analysis rather than modelling alone (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 85). Ethnography focuses on the everyday activities, routines, and perspective of actors in their setting, seeking to understand them on their own (emic) terms (Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Eriksen 2001: 36; Emerson et al. 1995: 10). It has three important characteristics: (1) it is often equated with the method participant observation (O'Reilly 2009: 122), (2) it is committed to methodological holism, accepting that anything in the context could be relevant (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 7), and (3) some scholars describe it as a 'sensibility', an orientation where the field-site and participants reveal what is important (Ybema et al. 2009). Ethnographers are increasingly 'studying up' in powerful organisations (Nader 1972; Wright 1994: 14) and exploring the ways in which people manage their day-to-day work situation (Rosen 1991). Immersion in daily life gives access to taken-for-granted practices which shape the way politics is practised (Schatzberg 2008). Some ethnographic work has been done on the EU (see Shore 2000, Abélès 1993, Abélès et al 1993, Demossier 2011)and this approach has also proven insightful in other political locations, including Westminster and Washington (see Fenno 1978; Hilmer 2011; Joseph et al. 2007; Matthews 1960; Schatz 2009; Searing:1994). Ethnography puts people back into political analysis, reminding us they conduct European processes (Adler-Nissen 2009: 22; see Busby 2011; 2013).

This paper emphasises everyday information management and communication practices. An interpretive approach has enabled us to make sense of the qualitative data collected through fieldwork. In line with institutional ethnography and Abélès' work (1993), our aim is to explore the social life of the institution with an unconventional eye where social order is not conceived as a formal structure but notions such as naturally-occurring contingencies and informality can be explored (Silverman 2006). We have triangulated data from four methods: participant observation, observation, elite interviews, and a survey, to enhance credibility (Seale 2004). Ethnographic research was conducted separately by the authors and data were combined for this paper.

Participant observation was conducted by one author for seven months in 2010 via an internship with an MEP in Brussels, enabling her to observe and experience the organisation of everyday political life by being engaged in backstage activities (Busby 2011, 2013). This data is referred to as 'Obs 1'. Observation by the second author was conducted for shorter periods in two MEPs' offices, two weeks being spent in each in 2011. These are referred to as 'Obs 2'. These observations focused on information and communication practices during committee and political group weeks in Brussels. We have also conducted 73 elite interviews with MEPs, assistants, trainees, officials, and lobbyists from 2010-2012, discussing their role in and experiences of the legislative process, communication practices, and institutional life. Finally, a (qualitative) survey was e-mailed to the assistants in December 2010. Designed in MS Word, it allowed respondents to write as much as they wished for 15 open-ended questions about their role and experience of working in the EP. It also requested eight pieces of nominal data about themselves (e.g. nationality); 48 people responded from seven political

groups and 20 nationalities. We note that the survey was not designed to make statistical inferences but to produce a rich source of data to illuminate the role of assistants and wider processes occurring in this context, as qualitative work allows. Likewise, ethnographic fieldwork has enabled us to explore and focus on activities and processes constituting the everyday life of the MEP office work space, and the central role of assistants within it, rather than to make generalisations about MEP behaviour. We explore how, within this backstage space, assistants help MEPs cope with the particular work environment they face and practice politics within. We explore the office as the backstage location in which MEPs prepare for frontstage performances, to enable them to successfully exert influence here.

1.3. Theoretical framework

This paper is informed by Goffman's work (1959; Wodak 2009). It explores behaviour and processes in a backstage region of a workplace, approaching social order as the way people conduct themselves together. It draws on Goffman's dramaturgy metaphor and distinction between the front and backstage. Goffman (1959) outlines a theatrical, or dramaturgical, vocabulary to describe everyday social encounters, making the point that 'we are all performers in the interest of order' (Manning 2008: 679). He approaches the social life as a performance in which individuals present the best version of themselves through impression management techniques. Goffman's 'self' is a social product. Firstly 'the self' is the product of performances and arises as a result of publicly validated performances. Although individuals actively fashion self-indicating performances, they are constrained to present an image which is socially supported in the context of a status hierarchy and surrounding social system: i.e. what dispositions are seen as appropriate. Secondly, the degree to which the individual is able to sustain a respectable self-image depends on possession of structural resources and attributes deemed desirable by the dominant culture (Branaman 1997: xlvi, liii). For politicians, appearing professional, knowledgeable, and informed is crucial to give a credible frontstage performance to convince and persuade other actors of your position and therefore influence proceedings. A performance is 'given' if it is intended to influence other participants' understanding of a situation or topic. People try to distinguish between the 'given off' and 'given' (i.e. planted) – or real versus contrived respectively – elements of a performance. This is therefore an essential distinction for politicians' credibility and ability to persuade others and exert influence. The key to dramaturgical success is to control the audience's access to information so that 'given' elements are believed to be 'given off': e.g. a politician might appear extremely knowledgeable and thus convince colleagues, voters, or journalists of their position or vision, while the audience remains unaware of a frantic briefing which occurred backstage with staff minutes beforehand (Fine and Manning 2003: 44–8). Arriving on time and being briefed are crucial in the effort to persuade others; elements to which the assistants' contribution (sometimes seemingly banal and mundane) is vital.

Goffman extended the dramaturgical metaphor to the organisation of space, designating front and backstage regions. They characterise all organisations but have specific implications (Wodak 2009: 9, 54; 1996). 'Frontstage' is where performances take place and the audience is

present; political frontstages include speeches, press conferences, debates, reports, interviews, websites, blogs, emails, slogans, literature, and campaigns (Wodak 2009: 4, 9). A team constructs a view for an audience and a performance may be seen as an effort to give the appearance an individual 'embodies certain standards' (Goffman 1959: 110, 126). Performances are ritualised and are rehearsed to ensure a credible 'self' is presented. This preparation occurs 'backstage', where the audience is not (Wodak 2009: 10). Here actors shed their public role identity like a mask. They step out of character without fear of disrupting their performance. Suppressed facts and unofficial statements are discussed and access is tightly controlled by gatekeepers. To defend their show, participants exhibit 'dramaturgical loyalty' meaning they adhere to the moral obligation of protecting their team's secrets (Branaman 1997: lxvi). For Goffman, 'the axial distinction' of any grouping is between the public and private, private being 'a little collection of people with mutual gaze and focus' (Manning 2008: 680).

Frontstage performances (e.g. plenary speeches,) are prepared backstage where 'illusions and impressions are openly constructed' (Goffman 1959: 114). Goffman emphasised the strategic planning of performances and the control and manipulation of information to gain the upper hand in competitive interactions (Branaman 1997: lxiv). Preparation enables MEPs to give credible and thus persuasive performances and convince others of their position, enabling them to exert influence in processes and over outcomes; e.g. group voting lists and committee votes. Control of information plays a central role in this. Enormous preparation has to be done to influence (political) decision-making and being well prepared means having relevant facts and prepared criticisms, interventions, and amendments to set the agenda, shape opinions, and draft documents according to political interests (Wodak 2009: 46). The assistants play a crucial backstage role in preparing MEPs for frontstage performances and therefore affect their capacity to exert influence successfully. We now explore the mechanism through which they do this, as they act as information 'interfaces' within the MEP office.

2. The assistants

2.1. The "eyes and ears": Why are the assistants important?

Whilst it is almost 'conventional wisdom' that politicians cannot make all their decisions alone, (Van Schendelen and Scully 2003: 122) we argue that EP assistants are important for particular reasons relating to the technical and transnational nature of this institution and work context. One of the MEPs explained the importance of assistants: whilst he is absent from Brussels his assistants are his 'eyes and ears' trusted to 'spot and catch' important developments (Obs 1). The EP work environment is characterised by absence and information overload. Firstly, the EP's transnational nature and dual seat mean MEPs travel frequently between Brussels, Strasbourg, and constituencies. The EP calendar designates *weeks* to each of these locations and strictly structures MEPs' time. This constant travelling means they often spend three days a week in Brussels or Strasbourg, meaning they feel constantly short of

time and are often physically absent. Secondly, the EP, whilst becoming increasingly professional, has traditionally suffered from high absenteeism (Scully 2007: 180). Thirdly, there is high turnover at each election, with nearly 50% of MEPs being new in 2009, and few long-serving members (Corbett et al. 2011: 51). This means that staff (particularly officials) play an important role in supporting MEPs as they learn how the institution works and in keeping the institution 'ticking over' whilst they are absent: one official described their role as the permanent supporting bottle which encases the wine (Interview-3). Finally, assistants are important due to the nature of the EP work environment which suffers from information overload. MEP offices receive a high volume of information every day; one office received nearly 200 emails per day, 262 were counted one day in a plenary week (Obs 1). An assistant said the inbox can make you feel you are 'drowning' (Interview-4). MEP offices receive two batches of post a day and the phone rings constantly as well as briefings from committees and groups arriving. The means through which communications are sent have also increased (e.g. social media). The information itself with which offices deal is often complex because of the highly technical nature of EU legislation. This workload has increased for active MEPs since Lisbon. As Marcella et al. have said:

> 'With the increase in the range of subjects, issues, interests and disciplines of interest to parliamentarians, there has been a parallel increase in the quantity of information available...The need for a means of retrieving and selecting relevant and reliable information from this mass is of ever increasing importance' (Marcella et al. 1999: 6).

This information overload has to be dealt with whilst MEPs are constantly travelling, short of time, and within heavily bureaucratic structures. MEPs therefore need assistants to filter the overload to help them make decisions and prepare efficiently for performances. MEPs also need assistants to provide tailored information so they are prepared with relevant facts and criticisms to shape opinions and processes and persuade colleagues (Wodak 2009: 114). Assistants' backstage role is crucial because for politicians, 'the quality of the decision relies upon the quality of the information available' (in Marcella et al. 1999: 5). Assistants' information management role means they become powerful (hidden) actors (Wodak 2009: 117–8).

2.2. Background: Who are the assistants and what do they do?

This dynamic and extensive role of the assistants in MEPs' practice of politics means they require research attention. We first explore the characteristics of this social group. In Brussels, we were frequently told that if you want to know anything, you must speak to the assistants. However their role has remained virtually unstudied[2]; and Neunreither refers to them as a 'largely unused' workforce (2003: 57). Michon's work is an exception (2008; 2004). He argues assistants:

[2] EP officials have received more academic attention, see Corbett et al. (2011); Egeberg et al. (2011), Neuhold and Dobbels (2012); Neunreither (2003); Winzen (2011).

> 'Work in the background while holding subordinate, precarious positions as political advisors. They are helping to build the EU, and will hold future positions in European-level institutions and interest groups. A position as assistant is a step in a "rite of institution" that opens the way to a career in EU public offices' (Michon 2008: 169).

Before the Assistants' Statute (2008)[3] was adopted, the assistants' status was 'subject to discussion and controversy' as MEPs were their employers and conditions varied widely (Corbett et al. 2011: 75). An unofficial association formed in the 1990's which sought regulation but made little headway. The EP finally approved their Statute in 2008 which regulates conditions and payments and puts them on a similar legal footing to other EU officials, although MEPs still have discretion in choosing assistants, dismissal, and they receive lower pay than officials. The assistants are now entitled to training and have their own Board to pursue issues (Interview-5). The statute emphasises them being 'more permanent' which seems to have helped further enhance their status and role inside the EP. In 2009, there were more than 1,300 accredited assistants, with most MEPs exercising their 'considerable freedom' to employ two to four people as a combination of well-paid permanent assistants and less well-paid interns (Corbett et al. 2011: 73–7, 220).

We observed that this transnational group can be characterised as young, mobile, and well-educated. The survey data reflected these observations. Amongst the respondents, it found a balanced gender ratio and an average age of 28, although the modal age was 25. Of the 48 respondents, nearly 70% shared their nationality with their MEP and many come to Brussels for the position. An assistant said some MEPs employ staff from different member states to acquire extra languages for the office, particularly if their own skills are weak (Interview-6). The assistants are well-educated, 25% of respondents had a Masters, and many are recent graduates. We found this role is often an early career move, often being a graduate's first or second job. The survey showed they frequently take the position to gain knowledge of the EU policy process and politics, work experience, and contacts to pursue a career in Brussels or a related career back home. When asked why they applied for the job, the most frequent responses were that it linked to their degree or masters (27%), to gain experience of the international arena (20%) or because they were interested in European integration (20%). Seven respondents said they were sought out by their MEP because of some particular expertise. When asked about their qualifications for the job and previous experience, 56% cited university qualifications and some mentioned other related positions, the most frequent being working for a national party, national Ministry, or other Brussels-based internships. Our discussions with assistants showed us this group is cosmopolitan; they are often well-travelled, multi-lingual, and/or have studied abroad, thus being characterised as mobile. We found it is important to study assistants as individuals on a *career trajectory* rather than as a static group because they are building their careers, as Michon (2008) suggests. This means there is high turnover within the group: nearly 45% of respondents had worked in the EP for less than a year and nearly 85% had worked for up to and including three years. Assistants play a key role in socialising the frequent newcomers into the institution, as is discussed later.

[3] Council Regulation (EC) No 160/2009 of 23 February 2009.

We also explored what the assistants do, their daily activities. The survey asked about the tasks their job involves and again the responses mirrored our observations of their backstage organisational and information management role which we saw conducted in the three MEP offices. The question allowed respondents to write as much or as little as they pleased, and responses were coded and categorised (Appendix-1). Assistants carry out a wide range of backstage tasks to prepare their MEP for frontstage performances. Office tasks were included by most respondents (e.g. diary management, checking emails, phone-calls, booking travel, processing expenses, and training staff), demonstrating assistants' key role in organising the minutiae of an MEP's political life in the locations they practice politics. As one assistant told us, the diary is the cornerstone of the office and if this does not function then nothing else can, as the MEP cannot perform their role if performances are not scheduled correctly (Obs 1). Legislative and research tasks were commonly cited and elaboration on what these entail varied. Assistants' legislative tasks show their deep involvement in the policy process. They follow committees for their MEP, and some also draft amendments, help write Own Initiative reports, highlight issues for their MEP, and help the group policy advisors draw up voting lists. Some assistants give their MEP policy advice (17% of respondents). The political tasks illustrate their involvement in institutional politics and highlight their growing role and status; 25% included political tasks, with 17% saying they give their MEP political or strategic advice and 10% meeting independently with the group or NPD. The meetings category supports this: some assistants attend meetings their MEP cannot and may speak on their behalf and some meet independently with interest groups and actors from other EU institutions.

Other categories illustrate the important backstage preparations they are involved with. Over half of respondents said they carried out research, most often referring to briefings but also articles, speeches, and research projects to prepare credible frontstage performances for their MEPs and aid decision-making. Assistants are involved in public relations and the MEP's (frontstage) image. They carry out media tasks such as writing press releases and blogging. Some Brussels-based assistants are involved with constituent relations, answering queries and organising visits, although MEPs often also have constituency staff. A small number of survey respondents said they organise events, but this was something we observed as an important part of institutional life, as events happen every day in the EP's numerous open spaces to help disseminate information on salient topics. After one of the assistants helped an environmental interest group organise a seminar her MEP sponsored, they thanked the MEP in the closing speech, but were keen to contact the office and stress their gratitude for her help afterwards, acknowledging assistants' key backstage role[4].

We found that rather than a (mutually exclusive) typology existing where assistants focus on one (or perhaps more) of these task categories, an *assistant spectrum* characterises their work. Assistants are not confined to one role and in fact they are often expected to perform all of them most days. When discussing the imminent arrival of one of the observed MEP's new assistant with an EP official, he asked where the assistant would fall on the *assistant*

[4] Michon (2004) also identifies these kinds of activities, and argues assistants play four roles; secretary, PR, legislative, and political roles.

spectrum. He said some assistants tend towards the secretarial end and others the political advisor end of the *assistant spectrum* which has varying degrees of combination roles in the middle (Obs 1). Where an assistant falls on the spectrum depends, firstly, on their own abilities, inclinations, interests, and ambitions, and, secondly, on the skills, needs, and temperament of the MEP. Whilst some MEPs want policy and political advice and expect their assistants to become involved in committee work, others prefer them to perform a (more) secretarial function, perhaps if they are more independent, longer-serving, and have good technology skills. The spectrum reflects the growing importance of (some) EP assistants who perform a policy advisor role. A lobbyist said they are increasingly keen to meet assistants who they recognise play a key role in briefing and advising MEPs. He found MEPs are increasingly busy with legislative work after Lisbon and cannot see lobbyists so often, so instead they sometimes approach assistants (Obs 1).

Our fieldwork highlighted two other key observations about assistants' daily work. Firstly, a high degree of multitasking is expected of them. They are often expected to perform many of the tasks discussed – switching between giving a visitor's tour, booking diary appointments, meeting with lobbyists, and drafting amendments – if not every day, then certainly over the course of an EP calendar month. One of the assistants, who had previously worked in the private sector, observed that she had initially been surprised by the degree of multi-tasking and different skills expected from one person who is a secretary, researcher, advisor, and negotiator (Obs 1). The division of labour decided within offices is our second key observation. As the surveys support, there is a link between length of service and type of tasks. More prestigious tasks tend to be reserved for longer-serving staff, such as office management, giving political and policy advice, writing briefings and reports, oral questions, and meeting external organisations. Meanwhile newer staff, particularly those serving less than 3 months, are often left with more mundane tasks, such as booking travel, sorting post, written questions, research projects, media review, minutes, and perhaps drafting amendments. Offices tend to have a senior assistant who has (usually) served the longest and their seniority might be displayed through ownership of the best desk whilst trainees are squeezed in. Most MEPs are members and substitutes of multiple committees and the senior assistant is likely to follow the main committee whilst junior members are allocated substitute committees. However, this division of labour means that all staff are valued by the MEP, and the MEPs we observed also gave instructions directly to trainees, meaning the hierarchy is fluid rather than rigid.

3. Information "interfaces": Gate-keeping, filtering, and tailoring

Assistants' mundane daily information management practices are crucial for MEPs because 'the quality of the decision relies upon the quality of the information available' (in Marcella et al. 1999: 5). By fulfilling and performing this role, assistants become powerful (hidden) actors. By being in charge of much organisational and political knowledge an assistant 'gains knowledge (and thus power) by selectively managing flows of information from the 'centre' *[the secretariat]*, and thus MEPs depend heavily on them' (Wodak 2009: 117–8). By

performing the everyday banal tasks described, assistants help prepare their MEPs to give credible frontstage performances and inform their decision-making process. We argue that assistants play an important role as information 'interfaces' in the MEP office space. Assistants fulfil this role by carrying out three core functions: gate-keeping, and filtering and tailoring information. Through these core functions they play a pivotal role in MEP's practice of politics, when politics is seen as a persuasive activity conducted every day rather than just as final (plenary) votes. As Respondent 37 said:

> 'Assistants have varying levels of direct influence, but significant indirect influence through selectivity of correspondence they choose to highlight, reports they raise, and amendments they choose to identify as important. MEPs cannot read and be experts on every piece of legislation they vote on, nor do policy advisors highlight every report in full detail' (Question-13[5]).

3.1. Gate-keeping

Firstly, assistants, like secretaries anywhere, perform a *gate-keeping* function, to protect the backstage region, their show, and the presentation of 'the self' presented by the MEP in frontstage performances. Anyone, known or unknown, trying to speak to, meet, or send information to an MEP, will usually have to get through the assistant who embodies the MEP's interest. This is why a high level of trust between the MEP and their assistants is crucial because MEPs often rely on assistants to identify what is important and to dismiss the less relevant. This is because, as described, MEPs are constantly travelling and short of time. Assistants are therefore trusted to 'spot and catch' what is important and should be given the MEP's time and attention.

Gate-keeping occurs in a number of ways. Physically, assistants may refuse entry to those who appear unscheduled at the door – although this is rare because of the high levels of security and visitors are likely acquaintances of the MEP. However, visitors may be lobbyists who have access badges to the EP's Espace Léopold building during group and committee weeks. Assistants may also extract MEPs from over-running meetings or cut them short at the MEP's request in a pre-arranged manner. However, gate-keeping most often occurs via the phone and email. Interest groups, officials, and other MEP offices regularly call the offices, but most often they will be told the MEP is busy and asked for a message so their level of importance can be assessed and the MEP can decide whether to call them back or not. Whilst this may be experienced as frustrating for recipients (including academics seeking research interviews), acting as guardians of their MEP's time is an important part of an assistant's job. Gate-keeping also occurs via e-mail when requests are sent for meetings and assistants will inform actors of whether there is space in the diary or not, which brings us to the filtering function.

[5] Question 13: "Who has the most influence over legislation in the EP?".

3.2. Filtering

Assistants also perform a *filtering* function. As discussed, MEP offices receive large volumes of communications and batches of technical information every day. Again, the assistants are regularly trusted by MEPs to filter this avalanche, dispose of the irrelevant and extract the relevant. Each office has their own particular information management procedures and MEPs may check emails themselves to varying degrees, depending on their technology skills and temperament. At the start of the fieldwork internship, the researcher was briefed on the MEP's priorities, most of which related to his committees, delegation, EP office, and some personal policy and political interests. These priorities were then used to filter communications and decide what would make it on to the MEP's desk and what would be either filed or disposed of entirely (Obs 1).

Mail is delivered twice a day to pigeon-holes near the MEP offices and anyone can put mail in the third floor pigeon-hole bank. Non-priority invites and briefing documents sent by interest groups are often instantly recycled or filed away, whilst relevant materials are put into files and passed to the MEP's desk. If action is required, this will then be indicated by the MEP when the files are returned to the assistants. In one office, files were kept for invites, group/party communications, and committee files. A similar system operates for the e-mail inbox. Irrelevant emails are deleted, non-urgent emails filed, and important emails and those requiring the MEP's response are extracted through either a printing or flagging system. Assistants might also have a flagging system for emails relating to their own projects and interests. Again this filtering role is vital to protect MEPs' time and stop them drowning in the information overload, and to ensure they have time to digest relevant information and prepare credible performances in their priority (policy) areas. Our observations showed that as well as commanding hours of the assistants' attention, the inbox is constantly 'pinging' in the background. One assistant insisted that emails are an integral part of their job and that 'you have to have access to your emails all the time' (Obs 2). One assistant said she experienced the inbox as a 'bind' which you fear leaving in case you miss something crucial (Interview-4) – spotting developments being a key part of their role. A number of the survey respondents indicated that they spend a lot of time on e-mails and other bureaucratic tasks and would prefer to spend their time on other tasks they perceived as more important, useful, or productive – or perhaps as more prestigious rather than mundane. However, as we have described, assistants are expected to perform office tasks as well as more prestigious political and legislative tasks as these are crucial to organising MEPs' frontstage performances.

3.3. Tailoring

Thirdly, assistants regularly provide *tailored* information to MEPs which they request and require. Firstly, this is by passing on communications in accordance with the MEP's priorities along with what the assistant assesses to be important for them to be aware of. This might be communications and information relating to salient issues, debates within the group or committee, or information from their national party or member-state Permanent

Representation. Secondly, assistants acquire and process further information which the MEP either specifically requests or they feel will be helpful in the pursuit of their agenda, by carrying out further research. This tailored information can take the form of small, urgent pieces of information such as a statistic, name, or fact which is quickly texted as a last minute addition to a speech or document. However tailored information might also be research reports, articles, or speeches which are the result of hours of work by the assistants. They collate information from a variety of sources into a digestible form which is useful for the MEP's preparations. This might be by writing a document (briefing, article, speech, amendment or even parts of an Own Initiative report) themselves, or providing a selection of information gathered in a file. Tailored information might be a collection of documents, briefings, communications, and other information gathered over weeks relating to a committee report the office is involved with, an event the office is organising, or a campaign the MEP is involved with. Tailored information can also be administered as oral advice, tailored in the sense that the assistant gives advice after gaining expertise in a policy area by following the committee and conducting research but is also aware of their MEP's ideological and national interests[6].

It is through this 'interface' role, or mechanism, that assistants become powerful institutional actors. Through these three core (mundane) functions – gate-keeping, filtering, and tailoring – assistants act as an information 'interface' in the MEP office space, filtering and connecting with internal and external sources and resources. They *routinely* play a part in shaping the stream of information which MEPs receive and base their decision-making, performances, and practice of politics inside the EP, upon. It is through this mechanism that these hidden actors affect individual MEPs' capacity to exert influence. Whilst EP scholars have likely been aware that assistants play a role in EP politics and that they conduct some of these tasks, this role has remained largely absent from the literature. Our research found that their growing importance demands we now pay attention to these hidden actors and their activities. The added value of an ethnographic approach is that it reveals the previously unappreciated *extent* of assistants' activities and their *routine* influence over MEPs' performances and therefore their capacity to exert influence and successfully shape outcomes. The mundane and banal nature of some of assistants' office tasks means they *routinely* exert influence in this space and knowledge management processes occurring there.

Wodak says there are several knowledge nexuses that structure EP power relations by controlling access; whilst the secretariat stores information about the institution, assistants are at a lower level and 'interface' with the secretariat 'tailoring its demands and outputs to the specific agenda of the MEP' and thus assistants gain power by selectively managing information flows (Wodak 2009: 117–8). However as we have described, there is an *assistant spectrum* and the degree to which MEPs rely on their assistants varies. We note that MEPs also have other sources upon which they draw information from, such as their constituency office, personal contacts, and privately arranged meetings and reading. However, by carrying

[6] As a reviewer pointed out, when exercising these three functions, the content of the information and whose arguments are listened to and who is filtered or disregarded is vital to learning more about power and influence. However, it is beyond the scope and space of this article to expand on this issue here, but see Busby (2013) for some reference to how MEPs negotiate multiple interests in their daily work.

out observation in three MEP offices and triangulating this data with interviews and the survey to explore how typical our experiences were, we found that assistants play a *routine, sustained* role in the management of information which passes through the MEP offices in Brussels and Strasbourg. This space is also where MEPs' time is organised and from where they strategise, it is therefore an important backstage region in the everyday practice of EP politics.

4. Information and communication practices

4.1. Information: Assistants' sources

As Marcella et al. remind us, information is not a value-free commodity (1999: 6) and not all information is created equal. Information comes to the office from numerous sources and in various formats and is therefore perceived and treated differently and used in different ways by actors (Harper 1998; Hull 2012). We therefore also explored the sources of information routinely gathered by assistants, which is regularly passed on to MEPs, to see which other actors are (regularly) involved in backstage preparations.

Marcella et al. investigated MEPs' attitudes to the role of information in their work, assessing their ability to acquire relevant information, an under-researched area in politics (Marcella et al. 1999: 1–2). The need for 'relevant, accurate and timely information' to support decision-making has grown with the increasing complexity of government as more areas become subject to legislation. There has been a 'parallel' increase in the quantity of information and formats, exacerbating the need for effective means of retrieving relevant and reliable information. Because information is not value-free, the 'source and manner' in which data are collated will affect knowledge and advice and they argue MEPs' preconceptions will affect their choice between options and willingness to accept knowledge (Marcella et al. 1999: 5–6). Marcella et al.'s survey-based study found unofficial, informal contacts were considered to be the most important and reliable sources for (UK) MEPs. Whilst a minority had problems retrieving information, the majority 'expressed frustration' at the amount of information available, myriad of sources, and difficulty of identifying relevance and quality. Most MEPs conducted some of their own research, but none undertook it all (Marcella et al. 1999: 9–11).

MEPs, notably rapporteurs, are free to choose their sources of information and advice, unlike national ministers who must co-operate with civil servants (Neunreither 2003: 49). Corbett et al. note MEPs' increasing use of their assistants (2011: 228). Questions 11 and 12 in the survey asked assistants where they get information and advice from to do their job and which people and organisations they work with the most (Appendix-2). Our observations of the assistants at work concurred with the survey responses. Assistants develop their own networks in Brussels which they call upon for information and advice, as well as following leads and sources advised by their MEP, particularly during their initial months in the

position. Assistants draw on a range of internal and external, national and transnational, and political and administrative sources to acquire information and prepare their MEP.

Question 11 found the most cited source of information to assistants is 'other assistants'. During fieldwork we observed assistants frequently popping into each others' offices (of their NPD and group) with questions and regularly telephoning and e-mailing for advice and updates, particularly in areas in which their office did not specialise (usually because the MEP was not on the committee or did not prioritise the area). Whilst the internet ranked highly, so did the MEP and MEP office, meaning a lot of information is sourced from within and close to the office. As we observed our assistants doing, the respondents also listed the EP library, group Policy Advisors, and Committee Secretariats as regular sources of information as they would be called and emailed regularly for advice in the MEP's priority areas, particularly if they were working closely on a report. The EP and group secretariats and external sources were more often mentioned and in more detail by longer-serving staff who had had time to work on issues and build up networks in Brussels. Whilst the office and MEP are more important for new staff, 'other assistants' remain important sources for longer-serving assistants too.

Question 12 shows a slightly different constellation but similar actors listed as the people and organisations with whom assistants regularly work. The results are more diffused but illustrate the importance of regular information sharing within the political groups; the group secretariat, NPD assistants, and group policy advisors ranked highly as people assistants work with regularly. This concurred with our observations of assistants' communication and socialisation practices, discussed below. Many assistants also mentioned various external interest groups. When combined interest groups were listed by nearly 60% of respondents, with NGOs and lobbyists listed by more than 20% of respondents. Again longer-serving assistants gave more details about these organisations and they often related to their MEP's committee(s). Assistants mentioned they sometimes approach interest groups for information (particularly when writing amendments, articles, and briefings), but said often these groups sought them out first, particularly if their MEP was a rapporteur, shadow, co-ordinator, or active committee member (see also Marshall 2010). Over time, assistants build relationships with a network of internal and external actors with whom they regularly interact and acquire information from.

4.2. Communication practices within national party delegations

Assistants build relationships with a range of internal and external actors in their role as information 'interfaces'. However, as Question-11 shows, their most common source of information is *other assistants.* There are two important observations we can make on assistants' communication practices and their implications for their role as information 'interfaces'.

Firstly, we observed the predominance of face-to-face encounters – scheduled and unscheduled – between assistants from the same political group, and particularly from the

same NPD[7]. This reinforces the importance of the NPD in MEPs' daily practice of politics and decision-making (as found in the literature review). Interaction and information sharing practices occurring in the three MEP offices among assistants of the NPDs were frequent, scheduled and unscheduled. NPD assistants sometimes meet formally once a week, but also set up meetings to discuss amendments, as happened during Obs 2 between three assistants of the same NPD. Unscheduled encounters were also frequent, facilitated by the proximity of NPD offices to each other as assistants pop into each others' offices frequently. Assistants also meet and work with assistants from other groups at the sides, outside of, and on the walk back from committee meetings, as well as with external actors, particularly when the office is working closely on a report. However, fellow NPD assistants *routinely* act as their 'first port of call' (Busby 2013): they are the first people assistants regularly turn to when they need advice and information, in policy areas their MEP does not prioritise and specialise in (i.e. other committees). As an assistant described, 'it would be impossible to function if you weren't in a group...because the legislation is so complicated – you can't know everything about every little bit. You'd just drown' (Interview-4). This reinforces the role of the NPD in individual MEPs' everyday practice of politics and decision-making, through these mundane information sharing and communication practices.

Secondly, our observations also showed that informality plays a crucial role in information sharing and communicative actions more generally. Informal interaction among the NPD and group assistants occurs regularly. They frequently pop into each others' offices with quick questions and to discuss developments and often call and email each other with queries and messages. This is aided by the spatial arrangement of MEP offices as floors are allocated to each group and NPDs tend to be clustered together within these floors. This facilitates (physical) informal interaction in offices, corridors, and nearby lifts, nearby pigeon-holes, and photo-copying rooms. One of the NPDs also had a small common office nearby which they shared. Informal interaction is further facilitated as office doors are often left open and greetings are called. One of the offices happened not to be situated with its NPD colleagues so extra effort had to be made by them to interact with their colleagues. Although assistants from other NPDs on their floor sometimes said hello, they rarely popped in and did not invite the assistants to their offices, as the NPD colleagues did among themselves on the floor above. All of the offices observed chose to have coffee machines, reducing costs and time. However, in one office, the assistant said; '*well, it is joke, but not really, but we have a coffee machine in the office and everyone comes here to have a coffee'* – further facilitating informal interaction among nearby NPD colleagues. Dynamics were different when the MEP was present with less people daring to come in as working conditions were generally more hectic. The coffee machine facilitated informal encounters, first designed as private conversations, but which soon became a mixture of professional and personal content, or a work-related conversation (Obs 2). Again these everyday practices reinforce the role of the NPD in MEPs' acquisition of information and decision-making.

[7] We again urge caution about generalising from these three case studies and reiterate that the aim of this ethnographic research was to explore and reveal processes rather than to make generalisations.

The blurring of public and private interaction and identities described above occurs frequently among the assistants. Conversations among NPD and group colleagues would blur between personal and professional but tended towards the professional as they discussed the day's activities. Whilst assistants discussed work and might vent some frustrations, there was also a high degree of loyalty to their office and MEP, as assistants exhibit dramaturgical loyalty[8] to their team and show. Some assistants would humorously identify themselves as the "Team" of their MEP as they are 'a little collection of people with mutual gaze and focus' (Manning 2008: 680).

The assistants of one NPD spent a lot of time together outside of work, often going to interest groups events, and gathering on Place Lux(embourg) on Thursday and Friday evenings with many other eurocrats, going to events held regularly around the city on weekends, and regular parties organised for eurocrats (e.g. 'Eurovillage'). Conversations were more personal although work creeps in as this is their first frame of reference. Some of the longer-serving assistants made an effort to organise socialising events in September when a lot of new trainees arrived after recess to introduce people to each other, acknowledging the importance of these informal relationships. It was also helpful because new staff coming to Brussels knew few other people there before they arrived and this meant they had an instant social group[9]. However the degree to which NPD colleagues socialise outside of work varies, sometimes according to the age-range of the group (Interview-7).

Conclusions

This exploratory, inter-disciplinary article has highlighted the important and largely under-estimated backstage role MEP assistants play inside the EP. As well as taking part in the legislative process themselves, the assistants play a crucial role in providing MEPs with information for decision-making and preparing them for frontstage performances. (Seemingly) mundane and banal tasks such as diary management and sifting emails are a vital part of preparing credible and therefore persuasive performances so that an MEP can move seamlessly from meeting to meeting, negotiation to negotiation, and give persuasive performances and thus exert influence in proceedings and over outcomes. Assistants perform their backstage role from the Brussels office where they act as an information 'interface' through gate-keeping, filtering, and tailoring information. It is through this mechanism that these hidden actors affect individual MEPs' capacity to exert influence. Assistants carry out the three core functions to fulfil their 'interface' role; they gate-keep their MEPs time, filter the information overload offices suffer from, and provide MEPs with further tailored information. We argue that assistants become powerful actors by fulfilling and performing this role because they *routinely* manage the flow of information which reaches MEPs, and

[8] Participants engage in protective impression management practices to prevent disruption of their frontstage show; meaning they adhere to the moral obligation of protecting their team's secrets (Branaman 1997: lxvi).

[9] Rozanska highlights the encapsulating role of networking in the EU institutions and her informants said their social life was not very elaborate because of time limitations and fatigue from long hours; their social life was shrinking to colleagues they met through the institutions (2011: 275).

information is not a neutral commodity. We found that information often comes from within the NPD, often via other assistants, seemingly reinforcing the role of the NPD in MEPs' decision-making process (which was also identified in the literature review) through everyday mundane information and communication practices.

Assistants play a key role because of the particular work environment MEPs face and perform their role within, which is characterised by constant travelling, absence, and information overload. Assistants help MEPs to cope with this work setting. They filter the avalanche, provide tailored information on their MEP's priority areas, and gate-keep and organise their precious time which is limited due to the constant travelling between locations. In fulfilling this role, these actors play a role in MEPs' decision-making and help them to prepare to give credible frontstage performances. In this paper, we have explored the mechanism through which assistants play an increasingly important role inside this black-box. We thus open up the way for further research to explore and assess the role and weight of factors in this process; e.g. variation between different groups and nationalities and with MEPs' previous professional and political experience. Research might also explore the role of assistants in other important sites such as trialogues and inter-groups, and in inter-institutional relations. Ethnography, like other qualitative case study-based research, cannot be generalised like statistical inferences. However, what this in-depth work has done is illuminate wider processes occurring in the context and broadened our understanding of the boundaries of the political. It can contribute to the development of more dynamic theories of political behaviour and elaborate mechanisms to provide a deeper understanding of activity inside this institution as well as telling us more about the (everyday) conditions within which actors (try to) exert influence. The added value this ethnographic study provides is that it has revealed the previously missed *extent* of assistants' influence on their MEPs' capacity to exert influence through taken-for-granted daily (office) routines.

By taking an ethnographic approach to the EP and exploring everyday activities and processes, we have shed light on backstage dynamics of this institution and highlighted the importance of these hidden actors as MEPs carry out an ever growing amount of highly technical legislative work which increasingly affects the lives of EU citizens.

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Interview 3: EP official, General Secretariat, 5/11/2010

Interview 4: Green/EFA assistant, 17/6/2010

Interview 5: EPP assistant, 6/12/2010

Interview 6: ALDE assistant, 29/7/2010

Interview 7: ALDE assistant, 25/11/2010

Appendix: Assistant Survey Questions 10-12

Assistant Survey Questions 10: *What tasks does your job involve?*

	Number of respondents								
	<1month	**<3month**	**<6month**	**<1yr**	**<2yr**	**<3yr**	**>3yr**	**Total**	**%**
Office tasks	6	8	4	**3**	7	4	7	39	81.3
Legislative tasks	2	2	5	3	7	6	7	32	66.7
Research tasks	3	5	2	3	6	2	6	27	56.3
Media tasks	1	2	2	2	3	1	6	17	35.4
Constituent relations	1	4	1	1	4	1	5	17	35.4
Meetings*	2	3	1	1	4	2	3	16	33.3
Political tasks	1		1	3	5		2	12	25.0
Questions*	1	1			1		3	6	12.5
Organise events	1	1	1		1			4	8.3
TOTAL	**6**	**9**	**5**	**6**	**8**	**6**	**7**		

* A separate ‘meetings’ category was included if respondents put ‘attend meetings’ because we cannot know their nature. ‘Questions’ were again kept separate because we do not know the purpose of the questions.

Assistant Survey Question 11: ***Where do you get information and advice to do your job?***

Source	**Number of Respondents**								
	<1month	**<3month**	**<6month**	**<1yr**	**<2yr**	**<3yr**	**>3yr**	**Total**	**%**
Other assistants	1	5	3	3	5	3	5	25	52.1
Internet	3	2	1	3	2	1	1	13	27.1
MEP office	3	4	4	0	2	0	0	13	27.1
My MEP	2	3	2	0	1	0	0	8	16.7
EP Library	3	0	1	1	0	1	1	7	14.6
Group Policy Advisors	1	0	0	1	4	0	1	7	14.6
EP secretariat/ administrators	0	0	0	1	2	1	3	7	14.6
EP intranet	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6	12.5
Lobbies	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	6	12.5
NPD colleagues	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	4	8.3
NGOs	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	4	8.3
Experience	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	6.3
Group colleagues	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	3	6.3
Media	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	6.3
Group Secretariat	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	6.3
Permanent Representations	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	6.3

Commission	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	6.3
Committee Secretariat	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	4.2
Academics	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	4.2
scientists	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	4.2
Meetings	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	4.2
Constituency office	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.1
Nowhere	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2.1
National governments	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2.1
EP helpdesk	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2.1
National Ministries	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2.1
University	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.1
Events	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.1
MEPs at events	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2.1
National party	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2.1
Industry	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2.1
TOTAL	**6**	**9**	**5**	**6**	**8**	**6**	**7**		

Assistant Survey Question 12: ***Which people and organisations (internal and external) do you work with the most?***

Source	Number of Respondents								
	<1mnth	**<3mnth**	**<6mnth**	**<1yr**	**<2yr**	**<3yr**	**>3yr**	**Total**	**%**
Group Secretariat	1	0	2	2	3	0	5	13	27.1
Committee Secretariat	1	0	0	2	4	0	3	10	20.8
NPD assistants	1	6	1	0	1	1	0	10	20.8
Group policy advisors	1	0	1	1	5	0	2	10	20.8
Permanent Representations	1	1	1	0	3	1	2	9	18.8
Commission staff	0	1	0	2	2	1	2	8	16.7
NPD colleagues	0	3	1	1	1	1	0	7	14.6
MEP office staff	2	1	1	1	0	1	0	6	12.5
National Ministries	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	8.3
Group colleagues	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	8.3
National Party	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4	8.3
Embassies	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	6.3
Other assistants	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	6.3
Constituency office	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	3	6.3
Missions to the EU	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	4.2
National governments	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	4.2
EP secretariat	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	4.2
Regional authorities	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	4.2
Journalists	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	4.2

Citizens	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2.1
MEPs working on dossiers	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2.1
Committee colleagues	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2.1
INTEREST GROUPS (total)	3	3	3	4	2	4	7	28	58.3
NGOs	*2*	*2*	*0*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*3*	*10*	20.8
Lobbyists	*1*	*0*	*1*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*2*	*10*	20.8
Business representations	*0*	*0*	*2*	*0*	*2*	*1*	*2*	*7*	14.6
National associations	*0*	*1*	*0*	*1*	*0*	*3*	*1*	*6*	12.5
Experts	*0*	*0*	*0*	*2*	*0*	*1*	*2*	*5*	10.4
European associations	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*2*	*1*	*3*	6.3
Think tanks	*1*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*1*	*2*	4.2
Unions	*0*	*0*	*1*	*0*	*1*	*0*	*0*	*2*	4.2
PR agency	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*1*	*1*	2.1
Consultancies	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*1*	*1*	2.1