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'Normal Parliament': Exploring the Organisation of Everyday Political Life in an MEP's Office

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Abstract

The Lisbon Treaty has again enhanced the role and powers of the European Parliament [EP] and therefore increased the workload of individual MEPs. However many citizens remain unaware of what MEPs do and how they represent them. This paper reviews the academic literature and argues that we need to know more about how individual MEPs practise European politics inside this institution. Throughout, it argues that ethnography can play a key role in opening up this institutional black-box and enhancing our understanding of this profession by focusing on daily activities and backstage processes. It begins by exploring the working environment of MEPs, which is characterised by shortage of time, constant travelling, information overload, and highly technical issues. Secondly, it describes strategies MEPs employ to pursue their aims here, namely: specialisation, filtering, employing assistants, and information management. Thirdly, it draws comparisons with other professional fields to remind us the EP is a normal professional work environment. The contributions are twofold: the article provides a deeper, more nuanced, and more holistic understanding of (individual) MEP behaviour; and also helps to demystify the profession and thus help alleviate the democratic deficit by beginning to close the gap between politicians and citizens.

Keywords

European Parliament; MEP behaviour; ethnography; anthropology of Europe

To look at the history of the European Parliament [EP] is to see its powers gradually and continuously enhanced with each treaty (Scully 2007: 177). In merely 50 years, the EP has evolved from a token multilingual talking shop into a significant mainstream EU player (Scully 2007; Corbett et al 2003). Consequently, it has been called 'one of the world's most powerful elected chambers' (Hix et al. 2003b: 192) as the only directly elected international institution, selected every five years by over 500 million citizens. Despite its formal empowerment, the EP has a relatively low public profile and faces significant challenges with regards to connecting citizens to the Union (Scully 2007). After a week shadowing MEPs, BBC journalist Brian Wheeler said:

Beyond those people who are paid to cover it, few people in Britain really know what goes on in Brussels and Strasbourg. There are 78 British Euro MPs but most people would be hard-pressed to name one of them ... let alone the ones that are paid to represent them. Most of the time people only tend to take notice of the EP when there is an election ... or when a British MEP is embroiled in a financial scandal, or when there is a story about crazy Eurocrats and their silly rules - the "straight banana" syndrome ... few could really say they know what these well-paid elected representatives actually do (13/1/2009).

Despite the EP enjoying significant new powers extended by Lisbon, Andrew Duff MEP (rapporteur on electoral reform) admits that 'for all its new authority parliament is still unloved' because 'the constitutional set-up of the EU is largely unknown by its citizens. Its 'government' is complex and confusing...the EU is known more for its law and bureaucracy than for its justice and democracy' (in Banks 9/11/2010). Academics have traditionally devoted less time to the EP, judging it less important than the other EU institutions (Scully 2007: 175). Despite attracting increasing academic interest as its powers have grown (Hix et al. 2003: 192), former Secretary-General Julian Priestley has lamented that 'there is relatively little on the life of the Parliament' (Priestley 2008: xi; see Watson 2010). We still know 'surprisingly little' about pre-plenary processes (Ringe 2010: 1-5), how MEPs perform their representative function (Scully and Farrell 2003), and what they do inside the glass fortress of Espace Léopold. Wodak (2009: 4, 25) discusses our lack of access to the politics *du couloir* and argues that academia needs to turn to the political backstage and explore how politics is done as an activity. This can

help us gain a deeper, more nuanced, and more holistic understanding of MEP behaviour. The political field needs in-depth backstage research to demystify the profession which Wodak (2009: 25) argues could also help to reduce the democratic deficit, if these findings were disseminated for example through the media to the public. Ethnographic research can enhance our understanding of MEP behaviour by exploring everyday activities and revealing what this profession consists of.

This article responds to this context. It argues that we need to explore how individual MEPs practise politics here as an everyday activity. The article achieves this by exploring the organisation of daily political life from an MEP's office in Brussels. Throughout, it demonstrates that ethnography can play a key role in the endeavour to open up this institutional black-box and enhance our understanding of this profession by focusing on the daily activities and backstage processes occurring inside. The article is divided into three sections which build upon each other to address the gap outlined. It presents data from intensive fieldwork and immersion within this transnational community which enabled exploration of actors' daily activities, the ways they organise their time, perform duties, and practise European politics in this particular space. Exploring everyday behaviour allows us to investigate individual level strategies employed by actors. Firstly, the article explores the daily work environment MEPs face which is characterised by shortage of time, constant travelling, information overload, and highly technical issues. Secondly it describes the particular strategies MEPs employ to pursue their aims within this (work) context, namely: specialisation, filtering, employing assistants, and information management. Thirdly, it briefly reviews other work to draw comparisons with other professional fields to remind us that the EP is a *normal* professional work environment. I suggest these findings can help to demystify the profession and thus help alleviate the democratic deficit by beginning to close the gap between politicians and citizens, as Wodak (2009) recommends. This article provides a deeper, more nuanced, and more holistic understanding of MEP behaviour. It is based on seven months participant observation conducted via an internship with an MEP in 2010, 58 elite interviews, and other data collected for doctoral research (Busby: 2011).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MEPS?

Early EP scholarship was descriptive and examined institutional development (Verzichelli and Edinger 2005: 255) but as their influence grew attention turned to the MEPs and EP politics (Blomgren 2003: 5; Noury 2002: 34). Broadly, the literature finds that the empowered EP has become an important institutional actor in the EU triangle and co-decision has meant that the EU now has 'what amounts to a bicameral legislature' (Corbett et al 2011: 397). Meanwhile sophisticated statistical analyses of roll call votes [RCVs] have found that, internally, the EP political groups are highly cohesive, voting occurs along ideological rather than national lines, there is a traditional left-right cleavage, and a competitive, consolidated two-plus-several party system (Ringe 2010: 1-5; VoteWatch.eu 2010; Hix et al. 2003a). The tradition of RCV-based studies has found that despite high heterogeneity, EP politics is not fragmented and unpredictable but has become increasingly structured (Hix et al. 2007: 3). Another important contribution has been the statistical rejection of the traditional functionalist assumption that MEPs *go native* in Brussels as voting records suggest many 'do not shift their activities - never mind their loyalties - from the national to the European level' (Scully 2005 and 1999: 16). These findings have led some to suggest we find 'politics as normal' occurring inside the EP (Ringe 2010: 1-5; McElroy 2006: 179). These *normalcy* debates have focused on comparing the EP with the competitive party systems and cleavages of European national parliaments and particularly the US Congress, in preference to a focus on the EP's *sui generis* nature (Yordanova 2011; Bale and Taggart 2006).

This body of statistical research has significantly contributed to explaining plenary voting patterns. However a gap remains and we know less about individual level activities and backstage pre-plenary processes, and wider activities encompassed by a broader approach to political behaviour. An EP assistant insisted that to understand the EP, you have to understand the process by which a dossier gets to the plenary floor (interview: 23/11/2010). We have less understanding of the everyday activities and interactions occurring inside the EP (Ringe 2010: 2) such as processes in committees, groups, the Conference of Presidents, inter-groups, and co-ordinator meetings. Some qualitative and mixed research has begun to open-up the institutional black-box by investigating committees (Whitaker 2011; McElroy 2006; Neuhold 2001), roles (Bale and Taggart 2006), lobbying, and *relais* actors (Judge and Earnshaw 2011; Rasmussen, 2005). However, McElroy says our understanding of EP legislative politics remains in its 'infancy' (2006: 176) and this is partly due to the under-socialised nature of the literature. Jenson and Mérand argue 'the focus on formal organizations and asocial norms begs for a more sociological approach that would encompass the informal practices, symbolic representations and power relations of social actors involved in European society' (2010:74). Whilst not wanting to reject analysis of formal structures, they suggest that research has been 'too distant from the actors 'making Europe' and the conflicts among them as well as the social representations that organize their actions' (2010:74). A new generation of scholars is taking up this mantle with qualitative methods and empirical analysis rather than modelling, and a more sociological approach (Favell & Guiraudon 2011; Georgakakis 2010, 2011; Jenson and Mérand 2010:74-6). Ethnography has much to contribute to this endeavour.

WHAT DOES ETHNOGRAPHY OFFER?

Ethnography, with its focus on mundane activities, perspectives, and routines, is a methodological approach which can provide a deeper understanding of the everyday practice of EP politics by individual MEPs. Ethnography puts people, meaning, and the real world of politics into analysis (Vromen 2010: 253; Schatz 2009). Gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of political behaviour means looking for 'order in the apparent disorder' and, in contrast to mainstream positivistic political science which seeks predictable and rational outcomes, starting by assuming 'doing politics' is a highly context-dependent activity (Wodak 2009: 26). Briefly, ethnography is 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' (Van Maanen in Emerson et al. 1995: 10). Ethnographers study actors in their own setting, contextual factors, and seek to understand phenomena and actors on their own (emic) terms (Mitchell 2010; Eriksen 2001: 36; Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Denzin and Lincoln 1998). Ethnography is often equated with participant observation and some scholars describe it as a *sensibility*, an orientation to exploring the world where the field-site and participants reveal what is important and relevant (Ybema et al. 2009: 15; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007: 162). Immersion gives access to everyday rules and practices which go unquestioned as they are taken for granted as local common sense and therefore can have a real impact on the way politics is practised (Schatzberg 2008). Ethnographers explore the ways people 'come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation' in their work setting (Rosen 1991: 1; see Busby 2011).

There are two notable ethnographic studies of the EP (Wodak 2009; Abélès 1993, 1992). Abélès found 'at once, the impression of dealing with a closed world with its own codes and ways of doing things' (1993: 1-2). He describes everyday life within this closed 'beehive-like' world, and says; 'what I found interesting was what I would call not the *organisation of time* but its *disorganisation* ... movement is so constant that one sometimes loses sight of the purpose behind all these perpetual comings and goings' (1993: 2). Abélès investigates the double nature of European political activity; namely the tension between MEPs' representative and legislative functions (1993: 18). I build on

Abélès' work by continuing to explore order behind the initial apparent chaos and constant movement, and individual MEP's ways of doing politics within this context.

Since Abélès's seminal research, enlargement has meant linguistic and cultural complexity has 'vastly multiplied' and Wodak asks how the EP now works 'given the huge array of sometimes contradictory factors' (2009: 58). Her work on the EP's backstage *politics as usual* raises similar themes. She explores frontstage performances and backstage *communities of practice*, and MEPs' strategies for dealing with the disorder (2009: 14). She finds politicians' everyday lives are as messy and unpredictable as they are organised. Politicians acquire tactics to pursue their agendas but their success depends on their position in the field, power relations, and knowledge management because 'much of what we perceive as disorder depends on inclusion in shared knowledge or exclusion from shared knowledge' (2009: 15-16). MEPs require three 'knowledges' to practise politics successfully: organisational, expert, and political knowledge (2009: 46). Ethnography is capable of detecting these intricacies to understand institutional life which may not be accessible to other methods (2009: 26). Wodak's shadowing found;

in some ways, the multiplicity of orientations of MEPs appears to be functional for the way in which the EP operates ... in short, there is no simple description for the *job* of being an MEP ... depending on how individual MEPs organise their priorities, we find very different kinds of role/job definitions, various motives and agenda, differing visions, and multiple identities relevant for MEPs, both collectively and individually. However, we also encounter routinized patterns into which they have been socialised (2009: 111).

Wodak describes how MEPs construct multiple identities across different micro communities (2009: 113-155). Such research can illuminate what the act of representation consists of, such as constant meetings and enormous mobility (2009: 71-5). I continue to build on this by exploring the everyday strategies of individual MEPs within their work context and ways in which they handle their multiple roles at the everyday level.

Little ethnographic work has been done on the EU (Demossier 2011; Shore 2000) but the approach has been taken to other political institutions (see Schatz 2009; Joseph et al. 2007; Crewe 2005; Matthews 1960). The tradition has recently been summarised succinctly by Demossier who says the EU offers anthropologists 'a remarkable field' for studying institutions and power and in return anthropologists question notions of legitimacy (2011: 14). Medrano suggests sociologists have neglected the EU because they do not see a 'society' at the European level (in Jenson and Mérand 2010: 80) – a view a stint of ethnographic fieldwork in Brussels living among its natives in their transnational community quickly challenges (see Mundell 2010). Whilst political science may not be on the cusp of an ethnographic revolution, there is growing interest in its added value (Hilmer 2011; Wedeen 2010). This addition to the toolbox can mean the literature covering an institution or phenomenon is deeper, richer, and practices are better understood. Focusing on everyday activities enables deeper understanding of what encourages people to behave politically 'in the myriad of ways that they do' (Schatzberg 2008: 2) in complex institutions like the EP where decision-making is 'subject to a multitude of interests and a myriad of rules' (Noury 2002: 34). Ethnographers do not aim to make general claims about a group, but rather to understand wider processes occurring within the context (Cerwonka 2004: 5, 47) – e.g. what daily life in an MEP's office can reveal about the practice of EP politics by individual MEPs.

DAILY LIFE IN AN MEP'S OFFICE

Time: what week is it?

This section describes key characteristics of the context individual MEPs face in Brussels and are expected to practise politics within. This daily work environment is characterised by constant movement, a lack of time, information overload, and highly technical issues. To access this elite setting, one must first acquire an access badge. When observing MEPs and officials striding the seemingly endless grey corridors of Espace Léopold, you will soon notice these ubiquitous and essential items worn continuously around their necks, marking out the members of this transnational tribe, and the colour of their badge further demarcating their rank. Closer inspection shows what often occupies the reverse side of these lanyards is a business card edition of the EP calendar. This calendar is usually found on the wall of every EP office as it dictates what week it is, essential organisational knowledge for anyone hoping to meet with an MEP, influence, or take part in the decision-making process (Appendix 1). There are four weeks in the EP calendar; Committee (pink), Group (blue), Plenary (red), and Constituency (green) week, and the calendar is constantly referred to by those organising MEPs' political lives and activities around it.

Firstly, this system formally institutionalises these particular four priorities for MEPs and ensures time is allocated for these activities. As Wodak says, 'in some ways, the multiplicity of orientations of MEPs appears to be functional for the way in which the EP operates' (2009: 111). Time is reserved for MEPs routinely to perform their legislative and representative functions, if they choose to. Secondly, the calendar also dictates a particular ordering of these weeks; Committee, Group, Plenary, Constituency. Time is reserved for MEPs to return to their constituency to disseminate information about plenary votes and collect constituent views before the political cycle begins again. Staff are grateful for this slower paced week as the MEPs are absent, after the busy "Stressbourg" session, as Strasbourg week is referred to by some assistants because of the long hours and hectic schedules that constitute this week. Red Wednesdays and Thursdays indicate a mini-plenary in Brussels and committee and group time is allocated beforehand in the usual order. This particular order means the detailed legislative work is done *backstage* in Committee Week and the dynamic political work as voting lines are constructed in Group Week, so most of the hard work is done and decisions made before the highly ritualised session (or ceremony) in Strasbourg is performed. This ubiquitous artefact, the calendar, shows us how the EP's formal organisation temporally enables MEPs to perform their multiple roles across time and space, although they choose which policy and political issues to focus on within this structure and how they prioritise each role; e.g. MEPs may choose not to attend committee meetings or not to return to their constituency.

The working week in Brussels is Monday to Thursday, Friday being reserved for the constituency. The first thing an ethnographer/intern observes is the constant travelling expected from MEPs. As well as between Brussels, Strasbourg, and their constituency, this might also include Group Weeks held in other countries and committee and delegation trips. Most MEPs arrive in Brussels Monday lunchtime, their arrival being marked by increased traffic on Rue Belliard and the arrival of cars from the airport. They often depart Thursday afternoon or evening, depending on what events they attend. Therefore the time spent per week in Brussels or Strasbourg is often about three days, a situation which leads to the rushing around the building to get to meetings squeezed in around the EP calendar by their assistants, which is also described by Abélès and Wodak. The strict EP calendar and multiple working sites mean EP life follows a distinct rhythm, or ebbs and flows, felt throughout the Brussels Bubble. These include the daily flows of hectic preparation and briefing, demanding meeting cycles, quick lunches, and evening events; weekly and monthly flows of MEP arrivals and departures in Brussels and Strasbourg; and the EP's annual rhythm which is apparent throughout Brussels such as summer and winter recesses, monthly hyperactive plenary weeks, and annual events

such as the Sakharov Prize. This three day (Brussels) working week leads to a feeling that there is never enough time and time is a precious commodity for MEPs, something academics trying to get their 30 minute interview will doubtless have realised. MEPs' diaries are constantly full and are managed by assistants slotting 15 minute meetings in around the EP's official calendar of group, committee, and plenary meetings. Organising the diary is the first priority of the office; like a corner stone, little else will function if this does not and politics cannot be practised successfully.

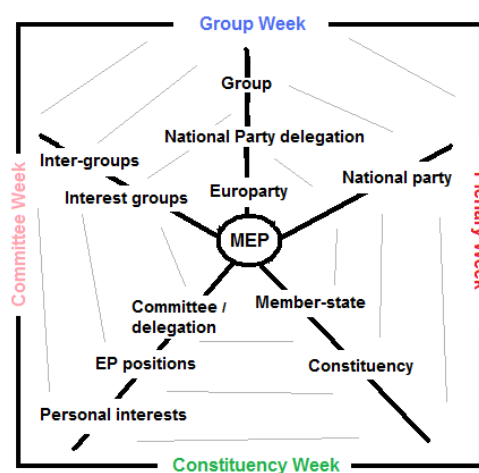
Information Overload

The number of emails, meeting requests, papers, and volume of mail an MEP's office receives every day can seem overwhelming. One day the MEP described us as 'suffering from information overload here', while an ALDE MEP said, even in his second term he finds the amount of information 'mind-boggling' (interview: 8/12/2010). A Green/EFA assistant said being in charge of the inbox can make you feel as though you are 'drowning' and this is the task new staff aim to move up and on from when they are no longer the newest member of the office as it is a 'bind' you cannot leave in case you miss something important (interview: 17/6/2010).

The two main sources of this information overload are the email inbox and pigeon holes, and the overload comes from the volume, variety, and detail of the information. Appendix 2 shows the variety of issues which vie for MEPs' attention; magazines, newsletters, and briefings present information on issues from nuclear power, green energy, and human rights, to pro-fur campaigns and baroque orchestras. The post comes from an array of sources from inside the EU institutions and outside from interest groups and constituents. The constellation of interests vying for MEPs' attention can be mapped from the emails offices receive every day. Appendix 3 categorises the emails received on three Wednesdays in June 2010. The office received an average of 194 emails per day, 262 in plenary week. The most frequent categories were: i) event invitations; ii) from interest groups; iii) about Written Declarations; iv) from the group; v) and were committee/delegation related.

This data gives us a window into the everyday life of an MEP and the groups and issues which demand their time and attention and constitute the everyday political landscape they inhabit. This constellation presents an individual MEP as an actor suspended at the centre of a web of interests which they must navigate, and which, over the course of the four calendar weeks which structure their time, tug for their attention with varying degrees of strength and urgency.

Figure 1: *Suspended in a Web*



Source: author's own diagram.

Whilst they may be perceived as suspended within this web, MEPs have a high degree of agency to decide how to prioritise and move around within it, how to spend their time in the Brussels Bubble, which issues to get involved with or disregard, and which interests to respond to. Again, this window reveals ways in which MEPs perform multiple roles at the everyday level, switching between functions in their daily activities.

Highly Technical Issues

As well as the volume and variety of issues which cross an MEP's desk every day, the issues discussed and debated and the legislation they work on is usually at a highly technical level. Political debates can concern deleting paragraphs or even changing individual words to alter the meaning of legislation; e.g. deleting the word 'directly' from a paragraph can make something more palatable to another political group. Negotiations are made even more delicate by the multi-lingual environment. As well as the legislation itself, MEPs and staff work within the institution's highly technical procedures. To pursue their (legislative or political) goals, MEPs and their staff need to know the different types of reports, voting procedures, and rules of procedure – key organisational knowledge as well as technical expert and dynamic political knowledge is required. To function here and communicate successfully, MEPs must master the EP's institutional language - its ubiquitous acronyms. As well as acronyms for committees, groups, institutions, and organisations, there are systems of symbols used within legislative documents and procedures to follow; to say nothing of acronyms for buildings and rooms. Some assistants told me, like everyone here, you will 'soon be speaking in acronyms'.

DAILY STRATEGIES

This section describes the particular strategies individual MEPs employ to pursue their aims successfully in this (institutional and work) context, namely; specialisation, filtering, employing trusted assistants, and information management. Observing and describing daily office life can help us understand the nature of the (micro) work environment MEPs face. Immersion in the office revealed strategies MEPs and staff employ to negotiate this context which can help us gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the everyday practice of EP politics. As Wodak says, 'politicians have acquired strategies and tactics to pursue their agenda more or less successfully' (2009: 15-16). However, like Belkacem (2011), my observation revealed that MEPs and the pursuit of their agenda cannot be thought of in isolation. The office unit is essential to an MEP's successful pursuit of their agenda.

Focus and Specialise

MEPs and staff interviewed described their experiences of EP political life and the strategies required to pursue goals successfully here. They were keen to stress the peculiarity of the institution: 'it is another world, you cannot imagine it ... it's very different ... if you don't actually work for the institutions, then you don't really understand how they work' (ALDE assistant, interview: 29/7/2010). They also described the EP's inclusive, egalitarian, and consensual disposition, which MEPs must acquire to operate successfully: 'the most important thing is to understand the culture of the place ... if you are not prepared to throw yourself into it at the beginning, you never really understand what it's about' (ALDE MEP, interview: 17/11/2010). What also emerged from the MEP interviews was a widely held perspective that to leave your mark successfully on legislation, an individual MEP must focus on and specialise in a narrow set of policy and/or political issues and gain a reputation as a specialist:

almost without exception, the people who achieve the most here, are those who specialise in and therefore become specialists in, a very, very narrow range of issues. Those who are interested by lots of things and dabble in lots of things, tend not to get to the heart of any matter, but those who specialise ... are often those who end up determining the shape of policy (ALDE MEP, interview: 17/11/2010).

we punch much above our weight ... the Greens were looked at as people with expertise ... there's an MEP from Luxembourg, who I think anybody in the Parliament would agree is the Parliament's expert on energy, even if you don't agree with him, people would respect the fact he is deeply immersed in his subject and knows it completely in depth ... we've had a much bigger impact on the shape of the Parliament, the way in which the majorities go, than some other MEPs (Green/EFA MEP, interview: 7/3/2009).

The crucial role of specialisation becomes apparent when you see the number of issues about which MEPs are contacted daily by their constituents and committee/delegation memberships alone, as well as by their groups, parties, and interest groups (Kauppi 2011; Beauvallet and Michon 2010; Whitaker 2001; Bowler and Farrell 1995). The highly technical nature of EU legislation coupled with MEPs' lack of time means specialisation in a narrow range of policy issues becomes crucial for those aiming to leave their mark on legislation. Focus is channelled with committee and delegation memberships, but inspection of the MEP's diary revealed that time is available between formal meetings for personal interests to be cultivated outside the scope of their committees and these interests can be pursued through involvement in transnational organisations, inter-groups, or campaigns. As the Green/EFA MEP above suggests, building a reputation as a specialist is a way for individual MEPs to exert influence in proceedings. MEPs are accorded a high degree of freedom to pursue their interests in the 'Brussels bubble' away from their national parties and media and within political groups who do not control electoral lists and have few sticks with which to discipline MEPs. However, the downside was expressed by a senior Belgian MEP to *The Economist*:

Star MEPs have more influence over the lives of European citizens and businesses than does any national parliamentarian ... 'But the frustration for an MEP is that you can do an amazing European job and not get any media attention'. This frustration is acute at election time, when MEPs sally forth in search of voters, only to be reminded that the public knows little of who they are or what they do—beyond a vague memory that MEPs enjoy lavish pay and perks (Economist 4/6/2009).

Assistants as Filters

MEP assistants are key players in the office unit and their backstage preparatory work is vital to the successful pursuit of an individual MEP's agenda. They play an important role in an individual MEP's achievement of focus and specialisation. Assistants, like secretaries anywhere, are often approached as troublesome 'gatekeepers' who must be negotiated before your interview (Fitz and Halpin 1995; Ostrander 1995). However observing their activities can show how this gate-keeping function is an important part of ensuring their MEP's success.

'Don't worry, you'll soon learn which ones are *actually* important' – this was the reassuring advice I received from my MEP's assistant as I stared at the number of emails appearing in our inbox on my first day. Assistants act as filters, stemming and regulating the flow of information to MEPs, allowing them to focus on their 'actually important' specialist issues. New staff are usually briefed on the MEP's priorities; i.e. their committee/delegation memberships, EP offices, constituency, key issues within these,

and any other interests. Essential basic tasks for office staff are to sort the post, emails, and phone calls, and to filter out irrelevant communications and extract relevant information for the MEP, to manage the information overload. Individual MEPs vary on how much they wish to know about issues outside of their specialist interests from the office - information therefore being obtained from the group and national party delegation [NPD] (Ringe 2010) and their own sources. By sitting in the 'airport lounge' or 'Mickey Mouse bar' on the third floor, you will soon observe MEPs striding to meetings, carrying files of paper prepared by their assistants, or with them in tow being briefed during a walk and talk. The second essential task of assistants is to organise their MEP's time in Brussels. They also filter meeting requests and prepare the MEP's diary by inserting personal meetings and events around the EP's core activities designated by the calendar. As stated, the diary is the cornerstone of the office and an MEP cannot practise politics in this hectic environment without a well-organised diary to structure and manage the limited time in which they have to practise politics. Knowing which meetings and events to prioritise is core organisational knowledge for assistants.

However, whilst the assistant's role is clearly important in organising MEPs' time, filtering information overload, and preparing briefings, the degree to which individual MEPs depend on assistants varies with their length of service, previous political and employment experiences, temperament, and information technology skills. However, by 'literally embodying the diary', briefing MEPs, and deciding what information reaches their desk, assistants can become powerful actors through managing flows of information (Wodak 2009: 117-118).

The Right Information

Assistants also seek out information their MEP *is* interested in. Having a network from which reliable, accurate, and detailed information can quickly be retrieved is crucial for an MEP to practise politics successfully in this highly technical, transnational, and hectic environment. Information required to convince colleagues of your position also needs to be in a digestible form of highly specialised knowledge. Assistants play a vital role in gathering information from a variety of sources and in preparing it in the form of digestible briefings, speeches, articles, and amendments, to help MEPs prepare to convince colleagues, a central element of the practice of the EP's (consensual) politics.

During fieldwork, I conducted a survey among the EP assistants¹ which, among other things, explored where that information which is regularly passed to MEPs is obtained from. The questions showed that information and advice are regularly obtained from a range of internal and external, political and administrative, and national and transnational sources. Information and advice are often found from within the office itself, from the internet and MEP. However from outside the office, the group and committee secretariats, and group and NPD colleagues are key routine sources, as well as many categories of external interest groups. The sources mentioned reiterate the familiar characters found in the 'web' that makes up the constellation of interests which surround MEPs in their everyday political life here.

Expert information is essential in the EP because of the highly technical nature of EU legislation. This is sought from specialised external interest groups, but also regularly by MEP offices from the (internal) group and committee secretariats and their advisors. An EP official explained that there is a lot of space for external experts and expertise because of the need for detailed information and a lack of time to find it, but internal experts are also important because of their (organisational) knowledge of political group, EP, and EU procedures and remits, which sometimes outsiders do not have sufficient knowledge of and advise tactics outside the institutions' scope and culture; e.g. recommending a plenary debate (interview: 24/11/2010). This again demonstrates the importance of being able to navigate the technical institutional landscape to pursue an

agenda successfully inside the EP. An ALDE MEP also said that to be successful, as well as getting on the right committee, learning the policy process, specialising, and being a rapporteur; it is important to 'go and have a cup of coffee with the key administrators', if you want to get anything done in this bureaucratic institution (interview: 17/11/2010).

Wodak discusses the relationship between information, knowledge, and power in the social world in relation to the EP. Possession of expert knowledge gives access to the political process. Her work shows understanding knowledge management is an important part of understanding how institutions work and finding order in this complex disorder:

Establishing order ... is linked to 'knowledge management' which implies the power to include and exclude, form coalitions and alliances; in sum, to 'play the political game' ... The distribution of knowledge is, of course, a question of hierarchy and power, of access, in organisations (2009: 26).

Examining actors' knowledge management practices, acquisition strategies, everyday information flows, and who is included and excluded in these, can help us gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the everyday practice of politics by individual MEPs. This can help us understand the strategies required to be successful within a particular institutional context (Belkacem 2011).

The First Port of Call

Over time, MEPs and their office build up a network of individuals and groups with whom they share and from whom they obtain (expert) information to help them practise politics. When I started the fieldwork internship, my MEP's assistant advised it was important I went to the NPD and NPD assistants' meetings and got to know the other offices and what they did. If I ever had any questions then not to worry as I could call these offices for advice; the NPD offices therefore acting as our first port of call. In these meetings, MEPs and assistants updated each other on their work (particularly committee work) and shared information and resources with each other regularly. This again enables individual MEPs to focus on their own specialist areas whilst knowing they will be regularly updated on others by these colleagues with whom they share ideological and national preferences (Ringe 2010).

My MEP soon gave me a research task which involved contacting a number of MEPs from other NPDs in our group for information to put together a briefing. He said this would also help me get to know other MEPs of our group which would be very useful for me. MEPs and their offices of the same committees often worked together and knew each other well. Once an MEP becomes a rapporteur or shadow and becomes involved in the detailed work of a report, the first people they are likely to contact are the group co-ordinator, relevant group Policy Advisor, and Committee Secretariat advisors. Relations are therefore built up and away from the office epicentre, with NPD and group colleagues occupying the nearest circles. The widely acknowledged lack of formal training provided by the EP for new MEPs and assistants (particularly those joining part way through a term or year respectively), means the NPD and group play a crucial role in socialising newcomers into the routines, habits, and codes of the institution. Three MEPs said it took about a year to learn how to operate (interviews: 17/11/2010, 15/12/2010) and one described a 'buddy' system his NPD had arranged after their previous experience (interview: 8/12/2010).

The NPD and group are key agents of socialisation into EP working practices and knowledges for individual MEPs; they 'provide ways to teach newcomers the routines of the organisation in terms of specific expertise' (Wodak 2009: 13). Socialisation can take a long time and at first routines can seem chaotic (Wodak 2009: 14-15), but NPDs and groups, their staff and members, help newcomers to cope with the complex and

overwhelming work context described and to see the order in the disorder which enables them to pursue an agenda successfully. Regular interaction between actors within these structures and information sharing which occurs within them continues to be a key strategy for MEPs aiming to leave their mark on EU policy and/or politics. This first stepping-stone – exploring daily life in an individual MEP’s office where information to help them make decisions and convince colleagues is filtered, sought, and collated, and the role of their NPD and group colleagues is key - is the first on a path by which we can gain a deeper, more nuanced, and more holistic understanding of individual MEP behaviour and the everyday practice of politics inside this institution.

A NORMAL PARLIAMENT?

So far, this paper has explored the daily work context MEPs face in Brussels and described some of the everyday strategies they employ to pursue their agenda successfully within this context. The characteristics and strategies described may appear familiar to many readers, evoking everyday experiences in their own professional field and workplace, as ethnography is wont to, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange (O’Reilly 2009: 158). Thus, this section briefly reviews ethnographic research in other (exemplary) workplaces and draws comparison with other professional fields to remind us that the EP is a normal professional work environment, as well as potentially a *normal* parliament which has been a central concern of the literature. This brings us full-circle to the context of this article which opened by describing a wider lack of knowledge of and engagement with the EP and its argument that we need to explore and disseminate information about how MEPs practise EP politics (i.e. what this profession consists of) to paint a more humanising picture to close the gap between politicians and citizens.

EP research has often focused on trying to ascertain whether the EP is a normal parliament to explain outcomes by testing congressional theories and comparing it with the US Congress and national parliaments. Research has investigated group cohesion, plenary voting patterns, and whether MEPs go native (Yordanova 2011; Hix et al. 2007; Scully 2005). The findings have led some scholars to stress the EP’s normal rather than *sui generis* nature as voting patterns, behaviour, and cleavages reflect those of other legislatures (see Ringe 2010: 1-5; McElroy 2006: 179). Ethnography contributes a different perspective to this debate. It reminds us that as well as a potentially normal parliament, the EP is also a normal professional field and workplace, which opens up another way for people to understand this institution and its natives and their activities.

Wodak (2009: 25; 1996: 170) says the latent order behind the apparent chaos in the EP reveals common features with other social and professional fields. Her research on communication barriers in a number of institutions shows gulfs and misunderstanding between professionals and outsiders due to technical jargon and structures (Wodak 1996: 1-3). Professional discourses are used which exclude outsiders and serve certain functions of power, justification, and legitimation (Wodak 1996: 170). Luyendijk (2011) describes similar findings, demonstrating that ethnographic research on elite groups is increasingly important where their activities have a wider impact on citizens. He conducted ethnography among bankers because ‘what happens in the City of London affects everyone, but most of us know very little about the people who work there – or what they do all day’ (2011). Luyendijk finds generalisations about ‘bankers’ obscure many different activities and roles which exist in the sector and that ethnographic work can paint a more ‘humanising’ picture. He also finds that they have much in common with other professionals as one banker compared himself with a GP: ‘you spend many hours memorising terms (body parts, diseases, treatments) and learning to recognise patterns. Then you put in very long hours and collect a nice salary, while employing your jargon to intimidate outsiders’ (2011).

Ethnography has been conducted in many organisations (Jiminez 2007; Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Schwartzman 1993); in fact, 'name the organisation and some ethnographer has written about it in some depth' (Levin 2003: 9). Latour and Woolgar's (1986) work is a notable and helpful example. They conducted participant observation with scientists in their labs to explore activities involved in the production and circulation of knowledge, and the social construction of 'facts'. They needed the demystification of the difference between facts and artefacts to show that 'reality was the consequence of the settlement of a dispute rather than its cause' (1986: 236). To understand scientists' behaviour, we must observe everyday actions such as out-manoeuvring a competitor so that science is similar to any other political field of contention (1986: 237; also Latour 1987). The resulting portrayal is that scientific activity is not about 'nature' but 'is a fierce fight to construct reality' and the lab is the workplace which makes this construction possible (1986: 240). A second way of understanding laboratory life draws on order from disorder; the 'transformation of a set of equally probable statements into a set of unequally probable statements amounts to the creation of order' (1986: 244). This is the result of training staff to create order from disorder through precision in measurements and recordings, because keeping track through meticulous records is how they see patterns emerge out of disorder (1986: 245). In science, few facts emerge and each scientist strives amid a wealth of chaotic events. When participating in controversy, they will find themselves immersed in a storm of political passions (1986: 252) – a situation which may sound familiar to politicians. Ethnography can help de-mystify science and scientific facts to help us understand them as human, social processes and build a bridge between scientists and society:

if the public could be helped to understand how scientific knowledge is generated and could understand that it is comprehensible and no more extraordinary than any other field of endeavour, they would not expect more of scientists than they are capable of delivering, nor would they fear scientists as much as they do (Salk in Latour and Woolgar 1986: 13).

Likewise, ethnography can paint a more human and realistic picture of political life. Through an ethnographic approach, I have explored the everyday practice of European politics by individual MEPs inside the EP; the activities constituting this profession, relationships between actors, and their everyday strategies. I have begun to explore how these activities and processes contribute to processes and outcomes. Ethnography can enhance our understanding of the behaviour of individuals within institutional contexts, and further dissemination could help inform citizens about what MEPs do in Brussels, the complexities, opportunities, and limitations they face. These findings help increase understanding of this profession by showing how familiar mundane aspects of this workplace are, making it more accessible because, as Andrew Duff MEP says, for many it remains that '*Europe* is elsewhere out there' (in Banks 9/11/2010). In fact the mundane daily activities of the MEP office reflect life in many other professional fields (e.g. science, banking, medicine and academia) where practitioners also feel the pressure of time, information overload, technical and bureaucratic procedures, and, to do their job successfully, they focus, specialise, filter unwanted information, know where to look for accurate information, and rely on colleagues for advice and support.

CONCLUSION

Whilst the EP literature has grown with the institution's empowerment, much of this research has focused on (predicting) plenary voting behaviour. It has taken a 'broad brush' approach and left us with less understanding of the political life of this institution, backstage processes, and the activities of individual MEPs (Ringe 2010: 1-5). Ethnography, which approaches politics as a context-based activity practised by individuals, can help address this gap and explore the everyday strategies MEPs employ within their institutional work setting to practise politics successfully. By taking an

inductive approach, ethnography enables us to explore actors' priorities in their own words and on their own terms and to discover new material about the subtleties and nuances of the everyday practice of EP politics inside this institutional black-box by individual MEPs, which may not be accessible via other methodological approaches. However, we discover that everyday life is not so exotic and can draw comparisons with other professional fields to enhance understanding. In-depth ethnography can help demystify this profession and make it more human and accessible for outsiders, an increasingly important issue for democratic institutions which face a disillusioned and apathetic electorate who feel distant from their representatives; whilst simultaneously the EP has more influence over legislation which increasingly touches their lives.

This descriptive paper has explored how individual MEPs practise politics inside the EP by exploring the organisation of daily political life from an MEP's Brussels office. It has explored their daily activities, organisation of time, how they handle multiple roles, and where they obtain information from, in the everyday practice of EP politics. Throughout it has demonstrated that ethnography can play a key role in the endeavour to open up this institutional black-box and enhance our understanding of this profession in response to Wodak's call (2009) for academics to open up the political field and explore politics as usual. The principal aim of (organisational) ethnography is 'to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation' (Van Maanen in Rosen 1991: 12). The paper has begun to address the gap in the literature by presenting data from intensive fieldwork on three inter-related areas which have built the argument of this paper. The daily work environment MEPs face is characterised by shortage of time, constant travelling, information overload, technical issues, and bureaucracy. MEPs employ particular strategies to navigate and pursue their aims successfully within this (work) context: specialisation, filtering, employing assistants, and information management. In particular, they rely on trusted assistants and NPD and group colleagues for information to practise EP politics successfully. These descriptions of mundane aspects of daily political life illuminate similarities with everyday life in other professional fields and workplaces and make the strange familiar. This paper has suggested that these findings can help to demystify this profession and that, if disseminated, they can help alleviate the democratic deficit by beginning to close the gap between politicians and citizens. This is the wider contribution this paper makes. To the EP literature, it contributes by beginning to provide a deeper, more nuanced, and more holistic understanding of individual-level MEP behaviour inside this institutional space.

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¹ 48 assistants and interns responded from across 20 nationalities and 7 groups.

APPENDIX 1: 2010 EP CALENDAR



01							02					03					
	52	1	2	3	4	5	5	6	7	8	9	9	10	11	12	13	
①		2	9	16	23	30		6	13	20	27		5	12	19	26	
②		3	10	17	24	31		7	14	21	28		6	13	20	27	
③		4	11	18	25		1	8	15	22	29		7	14	21	28	
④		5	12	19	26		2	9	16	23		1	8	15	22	29	
⑤		6	13	20	27		3	10	17	24		2	9	16	23	30	
⑥		7	14	21	28		4	11	18	25		3	10	17	24	31	
⑦	1	8	15	22	29		5	12	19	26		4	11	18	25		
04							05					06					
	13	14	15	16	17	18	18	19	20	21	22	22	23	24	25	26	
①		2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28		4	11	18	25	
②		3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29		5	12	19	26	
③		4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30		6	13	20	27	
④		5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	31		7	14	21	28	
⑤		6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25		1	8	15	22	29	
⑥		7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26		2	9	16	23	30	
⑦	1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27		3	10	17	24		
07							08					09					
	26	27	28	29	30	31	31	32	33	34	35	35	36	37	38	39	
①		2	9	16	23	30		6	13	20	27		3	10	17	24	
②		3	10	17	24	31		7	14	21	28		4	11	18	25	
③		4	11	18	25		1	8	15	22	29		5	12	19	26	
④		5	12	19	26		2	9	16	23	30		6	13	20	27	
⑤		6	13	20	27		3	10	17	24	31		7	14	21	28	
⑥		7	14	21	28		4	11	18	25		1	8	15	22	29	
⑦	1	8	15	22	29		5	12	19	26		2	9	16	23	30	
10							11					12					
	40	41	42	43	44		44	45	46	47	48	48	49	50	51	52	1
①	1	8	15	22	29			5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	31
②	2	9	16	23	30			6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25	
③	3	10	17	24	31			7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26	
④	4	11	18	25			1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27	
⑤	5	12	19	26			2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28	
⑥	6	13	20	27			3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29	
⑦	7	14	21	28			4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30	

- ⑦ Неделя / Domingo / Nedēle / Søndag / Sonntag / пүһapäev / Κυριακή / Sunday / Dimanche / Domhnach / Domenica / svētdiena / sekmadienis / Vasárnap / Il-Hadd / Zondag / Niedziela / Domingo / duminică / nedela / nedelja / Sunntai / söndag
- Сесия / Sesión / Zasedání / Session / Plenarsitzung / Istungjörk / Σύνοδος / Session / Session / Seisiún / Sessione / Sesija / Sesija / Ülés / Sessjoni / Zitting / Posiedzenie / Sessão / Sesiune / Zasadnutie / Zasedanje / Istunto / Sammanträdesperiod
- Комисии / Comisiones / Výbory / Udvalg / Ausschüsse / Komiteed / Επιτροπές / Committees / Commissions / Coisti / Commissioni / Komitejas / Komisijos / Bizottságok / Kumitati / Commissies / Komisje / Comissões / Comisii / Výbory / Odbori / Valiokunnat / Utskott
- Групи / Grupos / Skupiny / Grupper / Fraktionen / Fraktsioonid / Ομάδες / Groups / Groupes / Grúpaí / Gruppi / Politiskās grupas / Grupés / Képviselőcsoportok / Gruppi / Fracties / Grupy / Grupos / Grupuri / Skupiny / Skupine / Ryhmät / Grupper
- Външни парламентарни дейности – седмици за работа в избирателните райони / Actividades parlamentarias exteriores – semanas de circunscripción / Vnější parlamentní činnost – týdny vyhrazené pro volební obvody / Ekstern parlamentarisk virksomhed - valgkredsuger / Externe parlamentarische Aktivitäten - Wahlkreiswochen / Väljaspool parlamendi töökohta toimuv tegevus – tőnädalad valijatega / Εξωτερικές κοινοβουλευτικές δραστηριότητες – εβδομαδες εκλογικης περιφερειας / External parliamentary activities-constituency weeks / Activit es parlamentaires ext rieures-semaines de circonscription / G n mhaiochtai parlaiminteacha seachtacha - seachtaini toghlaigh / Activit  parlamentari externe - settimane di collegio elettorale / Parlamenta  rjelle pas kumi – ned las, kad deput ti tiekas ar v l t jiem / Isonie Parlamento veikla. Susitikim  su rinkėjais savait s / K ls  parlamenti tev kenys gek – v laszt ker leteti hetek / Aktivit tjet parlamentari esterne -  imghat tal-kostitwenza / Externe parlementaire activiteiten - achterbanweken / Zewn trzne dzia ania parlamentarne – tygodnie pracy w  kregach wyborczych / Actividades parlamentares externas – Semanas de circunscric o / Activit ti parlamentare exteriore – s pt m ni de circumscrip ie / Vonkajšie parlamentn  činnosti – t ždne vo volebn ch obvodoch / Zunanje parlamentarne dejavnosti – tedni v volilni enoti / Toiminta parlamentin ulkopuolella – vaalipiirivikot / Extern parlamentarisk arbete – valkretsveckor
- Помирителен комитет / Comit  de Conciliaci n / Smir i v bor / Forligsudvalget / Vermittlungsausschuss / Lepituskomitee / Επιτροπή ουνδιαλλαγής / Conciliation Committee / Comit  de Conciliation / Coiste Idir-r itigh / Comitato di conciliazione / Samierin šanas komitea / Taikininimo komitetas / Egyeztet  Bizotts g / Kumitat ta' Konciljazzjoni / bemiddelingscomit  / Komisja Pojednawcza / Comit  de concilia o / Comit  de conciliere / Zmierovaci v bor / Posredovalni odbor / Sovittelukomitea / F rlkningskommitt 

APPENDIX 2: MORNING POST

July Post

1. A magazine on how the EP has banned seal imports from Canada.
2. A dinner invitation from an inter-group with a discussion on the single market in the twenty-first century and how to make it greener and more efficient.
3. A CV from a graduate asking for an internship.
4. A reply from a group colleague to a request for information.
5. A regular circular from a Commission DG.
6. A pro-fur leaflet.
7. An information sheet on exiled Iranians who protested about human rights and an invitation to a rally.
8. An academic survey.
9. An advert to sign a Written Declaration on stopping the building of a nuclear power station affecting another EU member state.
10. A pamphlet on stopping smacking children and a sticker to wear for the awareness day.
11. Bulletin magazine from the former MEPs association.
12. Invitations to EP events on: Turkish accession, how football can change lives, drugs and international terrorism, women in business and human rights, climate change, how copper is important to everyone.
13. A report from an NGO on poverty in selected countries.
14. A local farmers magazine.

September post

1. New Europe.
2. European Voice.
3. Euroview magazine - the magazine of European business in Taiwan.
4. EU baroque orchestra newsletter.
5. Eurogroup for Animals newsletter.
6. Letter from a computer science research institute about their activities.
7. Response from a Commissioner about a constituency letter.
8. Second Response from a Commissioner about a constituency letter.
9. Thank you from a Commissioner about a constituency visit.
10. Three standard letters from constituents (via an interest group) on the banning of battery cages for hens.
11. Standard letter from an interest group asking us to write to the Commission on their behalf.
12. Moroccan High Commission for planning - a magazine on human development in an emerging country.
13. University of Munich, economic research institute letter.
14. Magazine - independent review on European security and defence.

15. Newsletter from Malabo (Equatorial Guinea).
16. National Democratic Institute - 25 years newsletter.
17. Most - quarterly bulletin of the Slovenian business and research association.
18. Food Today - European food information Council newsletter.
19. ERA (Europäische rechtsakademie, Academy of European Law) - invite and registration form for annual conference on European food law.
20. Advert from an MEP – asking to sign written declaration on reducing trans fatty acids in food to two per cent.
21. Human Rights Watch magazine - India focus.
22. Response from a Commissioner about a constituency letter.
23. Leaflet - from Advisory committee on fisheries and aquaculture - a body for dialogue with the fishing industry.
24. Invitations: concert to celebrate a state's independence, 'Energy Efficiency - smart metering / smart grids', Bavarian representation dinner roundtable, London Olympics committee event invitation.

APPENDIX 3: EMAIL COUNTS (3 WEDNESDAYS IN JUNE 2010)

	Plenary week	Group week	Committee week	Average
TOTAL	262	181	138	193.7
Event invitations	34	52	32	39.3
Interest groups (lobbies, NGOs, research groups - policy briefings, press releases, newsletters and requests)	26	33	18	25.7
Written Declarations	44	2	0	15.3
Political Group	23	11	10	14.7
Committee/delegation related	12	11	21	14.7
National party delegation	21	10	12	14.3
Personal Interests	19	10	7	12.0
EP internal - press and notices, quaestors, library	19	7	9	11.7
Internal Brussels office (including travel arrangements)	15	11	6	10.7
Junk emails	10	8	7	8.3
Inter-groups	9	7	1	5.7
Standard issues emails (from individuals via interest groups)	6	3	6	5.0
Constituency issues and visits	7	3	3	4.3
National party	6	2	3	3.7
National EP office and permanent representation	2	6	2	3.3
Housing adverts	3	3	0	2.0
Letters signing requests	3	2	0	1.7
National media	2	1	0	1.0
Council & Commission	1	1	1	1.0
Europarty	1	0	0	0.3
Other political groups	1	0	0	0.3

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