5 Digital Diplomats

In Brussels, there is a famous question about phone calls.

'Who do I call if I want to call Europe?' Anyone who has ever spent time in the Brussels Bubble is likely to have heard this question, most often attributed to the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. But the attribution is contested: 'The Kissinger "who do I call" remark', wrote *Financial Times* Brussels correspondent Gideon Rachman in 2009, 'was trotted out at almost every seminar I ever went to in Brussels'.[1] But Rachman, citing sources close to Kissinger, claimed the attribution was apocryphal and belonged to a list of 'famous sayings that were never said'. Whether pure invention or not,[2] the question hit a nerve and has since become a hardy perennial of Brussels Bubble folklore. In the context of this book, the 'Who do I call?' question helps us highlight communication and digital technologies as key ingredients of the political life in Brussels. Kissinger's question, in other words, is not only about *who* is in charge, but also *how* political power and authority is claimed and executed in practice.

This chapter explores how everyday work in Brussels is carried out with, and increasingly through, omnipresent digital communication devices, focusing in particular on the use of the (smart)phone as a vital constituent of work and life in the Bubble.[3] While Brussels

[1] Rachman, G. (2009). Kissinger Never Wanted to Dial Europe. Opinion. The World Blog. *Financial Times*, 22 July, www.ft.com/content/c4c1e0cd-f34a-3b49-985f-e708b247eb55, accessed 26 November 2024.

[2] The discussion of "who to call" is often linked to the discussion which President of which EU institution is the most important one. For a discussion of the different "President"-posts that exist in the EU, see Chapter 1 on the institutional organization of the EU and the 'lingo' of the Brussels Bubble.

[3] Whenever we write 'phone', we generally mean a smartphone unless specified otherwise. We call it phone, because that is how we and our participants refer to this device in everyday speech.

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politics is saturated with devices of all types, the smartphone is so omnipresent that it has become part of its fabric. On meeting and lunch tables, on desks and in the handbags and coat pockets of virtually anyone hurrying around in the vicinity of Place Schuman, you will find the Google Pixel, the Samsung Galaxy and probably most popular of all, the Apple iPhone. When we asked our research participants to name the single item without which they would be unable to do their job, many told us it would be their smartphone – so much so that if they accidentally left it behind, they would always go back to fetch it even at the expense of being late for an appointment. Sometimes, they use their phone so much that they need to charge it multiple times a day, and so serious is phone-lessness as a workplace issue that the term 'nomophobia' (no-mobile-phobia) has entered the Bubble's lexicon.

Consider the following moment that we share with Clara, a mid-level diplomat at a mid-size diplomatic representation, in the autumn of 2021. As we wait by the elevator doors, Clara swipes her ID card and the button lights up. She needs to fetch something from another floor before heading over to an exclusive closed-door meeting at the Permanent Representation of Greece. Tunisia is on the agenda of her working group: some external partners will be in attendance, and the rumour is that the Tunisian ambassador to the EU may be one of them. Clara's working group is concerned that democracy seems to be on the retreat in the North African country. At the beginning of the summer, the Tunisian president dismissed his prime minister, suspended the assembly of people's representatives and recruited the help of the army to assume executive authority.[4] Clara has been briefed by her ambassador to listen closely and, if need be, express her capital's worries about what is happening in Tunis.

[4] European Parliamentary Research Service. 'Tunisia: Political Situation Ahead of the Constitutional Referendum', www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729346/EPRS_ATA(2022)729346_EN.pdf, accessed 27 November 2024.

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'I am nervous about how I'll say this', says Clara as the elevator arrives and we step in. 'Maybe just very softly.' We nod encouragingly. Clara hesitates and then suddenly starts anxiously patting the pockets of her trench coat. She pulls a used tissue out of one and checks the other. The elevator arrives at our floor and the doors open.

'Shoot', she says. 'My phone! I think I forgot it upstairs. I really need to make it to the meeting. What time is it?'

'Just before 10', we say.

Clara's cheeks have turned red. 'Uh- I'll run and get it', she calls as the elevator doors close again. 'I may be a little bit late, but I really need to bring my phone!'

Incidents like this point to the increasingly shared experience of being unable to move through the day without one's phone. While not (yet) universally true everywhere, this phenomenon is on constant display in the Brussels Bubble. In this chapter, we argue that smartphone dependency holds a particular significance in the diplomatic and governance processes of the EU, in which the device has come to occupy the position of an almost magical object. Over the course of a single battery cycle, it can shape-shift from an information portal to a recording device, a notepad, a social outlet, a negotiation tool and a guardian of diplomatic protocol. While previous chapters focused on the rules and regulations surrounding the use of digital devices, our attention here is on the multiple ways in which the smartphone is effectively and creatively used in the work that gets done in Brussels. Much of its use is unreflective, and lifting a hand to one's pocket to check if the phone is there or quickly scanning the phone's screen during a conversation are gestures as ubiquitous in day-to-day interaction as uttering a greeting, holding eye contact, smiling or leaning in for a handshake. On other occasions, the phone can play a larger role, like in the moments when EU officials become acutely conscious of their smartphone dependency, or strategically blame their device for missed messages or technical hitches in a politically tense situation.

To illustrate how integral the phone has become to conducting EU affairs in Brussels, this chapter zooms in on devices. Our focus on

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the phone is inspired by research in the history and sociology of science and organisation studies and the accompanying and fast-growing field of science and technology studies (STS). As academic fields, STS and the sociology of science are equally vast and diverse and have informed work in international relations, diplomacy and European studies in many ways.[5] To make sense of experiences like Clara's and that of the others introduced below, we draw on concepts and ideas put forward by Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, whose work helps clarify the role of material artefacts in social processes and allows for a conceptualisation of global governance as a 'more than human' practice.

Decades before personalised digital devices such as smart glasses, touch-activated earplugs, biometric watches and smartphones with the computing power of a desktop computer became the norm, the American feminist philosopher and historical sociologist Donna Haraway wrote an essay titled 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs'. In the essay, she outlines how in an age of digital technologisation, the dichotomies between human and device are not only eroding but becoming increasingly theoretically questionable.[6] A 'cyborg', she writes, 'is a cybernetic[7] organism, a hybrid of machine and organism' whose emergence signifies a movement away from 'organic, industrial society' to

[5] In the context of the EU, this literature is especially advanced in critical security studies, border studies, migration, and the study of data politics, see for instance Bellanova, R., & Glouftsios, G. (2022). Formatting European Security Integration Through Database Interoperability. *European Security*, *31*(3), 454–474; Aradau, C., & Perret, S. (2022). The Politics of (Non-)Knowledge at Europe's Borders: Errors, Fakes, and Subjectivity. *Review of International Studies*, *48*(3), 405–424.

[6] Originally published as Haraway, D. (1985). A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review 80*, *15*(2), 65–108; we are citing from the version Haraway, D. (2006). Chapter 4: A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century. In J. Weiss, J. Nolan, J. Hunsinger, & P. Trifonas (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments* (pp. 117–158). Springer.

[7] Cybernetics, according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, is "the study of how information is communicated in machines and electronic devices, compared with how information is communicated in the brain and nervous system", https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cybernetic, accessed 26 November 2024.

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a 'polymorphous information system'.[8] Once this development is set in motion, 'we cannot go back ideologically or materially'. Instead, we must come to terms with living in a world 'intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology'. In this world, 'it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body'.[9] As a result, we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids or chimera, while the devices that we use – our 'prostheses', as Haraway calls them – become fundamental to our understanding both of the life that surrounds us and our most private selves.[10]

The ideas of the interactive agency of objects and the unstable dialectic of making and being made that lie at the heart of Haraway's argument have also been developed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour, among others.[11] Across a wide range of books and articles, Latour develops the concepts of 'actant', 'affordance' and 'assemblage'. An actant is a term describing something or someone that can make something or someone else do something. Importantly for Latour, an actant can be both human and individual and non-human and non-individual. A classic example is a light switch on a wall that acts by demanding a certain way of interacting with it (a press, a flick or a pull). 'Affordance' is the term used to describe what an actant does or can do (e.g. closing a circuit and switching on the light). Latour, and many others writing with his concepts in mind, note the political significance of such extended understandings of actorness.

On the one hand, this 'more than human' understanding of actorness allows for a broader range of activities in social analysis. On the other, actants can become sources of power-shaping responses,

[8] Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto, p. 117. [9] Ibid., pp. 130–132.

[10] Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, *14*(3), 575, p. 598 fn. 7.

[11] For instance, other members of the Paris group of science and technology studies including Michel Callon and John Law, but also other STS scholars such as Annemarie Mol, John Woolgar, Karin Knorr Cetina, or Sherry Turkle.

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practices and actions themselves.[12] A classic example of non-human actants or 'things' exerting political power is Langdon Winner's discussion of the low-hanging road overpasses built on Long Island in the middle of the twentieth century, which, due to their limited height allowed cars to pass beneath them but not buses.[13] Cars were at the time predominantly owned by wealthy, white citizens, so as 'things', the overpasses either awarded or restricted access to the city on the basis of wealth, class and race. Connecting and building on these ideas, an 'assemblage', for Latour, is the interaction or relationship that different actants – be they people or things – engage in. This relationship can either be with one another or with the ideas, norms and symbols that surround them. The ways in which this manifests, Latour argues, are dynamic and largely unpredictable and demand situated empirical analyses.

In recent years, these ideas and suggestions have been taken up by scholars of international relations and governance in many dynamic ways. Inspired by Latour, for example, Jason Dittmer wrote a book on 'diplomatic materials' in which he investigates diplomacy as the 'constant becoming together of media, objects, bodies [and] practices'.[14] It is in this 'becoming together' that individual political subjectivities and broader configurations of states and geopolitical communities emerge. Among Dittmer's key examples are practices of diplomatic protocol and the handling of information streams, but he also includes the buildings that diplomats use and inhabit, which he cites to argue that diplomacy is not limited to human-to-human, diplomat-to-diplomat interactions, but is also assembled by objects that 'act with' and 'act back' on them.[15] The result is a 'geopolitical' or 'diplomatic assemblage': an interplay between bodies, routines,

[12] Blok, A., & Jensen, T.E. (2011). *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*. Routledge; Latour, B. (1996). On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications. *Soziale Welt*, *47*(4), 373.

[13] Winner, L. (1980). Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus*, *109*(1), 121–136.

[14] Dittmer, J. (2017). *Diplomatic Material: Affect, Assemblage, and Foreign Policy*. Duke University Press, p. 3.

[15] Ibid., p. 8.

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dispositions and non-human objects such as embassies that mediate social, political and diplomatic relations. Similarly, other scholars, including ourselves, have studied how individual technological affordances – like the track change function in Microsoft Word or the (in)ability to post on social media platforms from within negotiation rooms – have made space for new diplomatic practices, which can include novel ways to negotiate influence, status and power.[16]

With these ideas in mind, we decided to explore what Erving Goffman might call the 'daily rounds' of smartphones in Brussels to illustrate how core practices of Brussels politics, including communication, information sharing and negotiations are executed and shaped by the use of digital tools. For this, we focus on different uses of the phone in different kinds of interactions. These include the simultaneous use of multiple phones in a closed-door trilogue meeting, the pragmatic use of a smartphone by Council protocol staff and the idle use of phones at the EXKi on Schuman and on the street outside the European Parliament. We also return to Clara to chronicle how she uses and interacts with her phone for the rest of the day. As we will see, there are two key elements involved in what Haraway calls the emergence of the 'cyborg', what Latour calls 'assemblage' and what Dittmer refers to as the 'becoming together' of diplomat and device. The first is how those working with and in the Brussels Bubble of today face the affective dimensions of an increasingly digitalised workplace, which express themselves in problems of distraction, addiction and dependency. The second is how long-standing but hard-to-pin-down concerns of protocol, tact, compromise and virtuosity become observable in the use, presence or absence of digital devices.

[16] Eggeling, K. A. (2025). Evocative Screens: Ethnographic Insights into the Digitalization of Diplomacy. *International Political Sociology*, *19*(2), Online First; Adler-Nissen, R., & Drieschova, A. (2019). Track-Change Diplomacy: Technology, Affordances, and the Practice of International Negotiations. *International Studies Quarterly*, *63*(3), 531–545 https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz030; Eggeling, K. A., & Adler-Nissen, R. (2024). Diplomatic Negotiations in the Digital Context: Key Issues, Emerging Trends, and Procedural Changes. In C. Bjola & I. Manor (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy* (pp. 103–120). Oxford University Press.

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TRILOGUE PHONES

21 November 2018

The meeting room is a short walk from the European Parliament, in an administrative annexe building that resembles a box of caramel-tinted mirrors. Inside the entrance on Square Meeus, there is a security scanner, where jackets must be removed, and bags and electronics placed in small grey plastic tubs for scanning, as at an airport. In the meeting room, which has four doors but no windows, participants sit in two rows of chairs. Christian looks up from his phone and around the room as the light on the overhead screen is dimmed. There is a sticker on the screen, which distorts its content if it is not looked at directly. More than half of those in attendance are looking down towards their laps, their thumbs moving on phones under the tabletop. Someone at the far side of the table coughs. With a quick hand movement, Christian settles his phone in his palm, screen up. Christian is a representative of Austria, which currently holds the presidency of the EU Council, and he is attending this meeting with two of his colleagues. These three Austrian representatives sit along one side of the table next to four representatives from the European Commission. *Vibration. Lights blinking. A soft buzz.* The sound of the incoming call is almost drowned out by the click of computer keyboards and the analogue sounds of paper being shuffled on the top of the table.

The atmosphere in the room is tense. The meeting started half an hour ago, at quarter past nine. Today's topic is the technical preparation for setting new standards in online content filtering, and representatives from the Parliament, Commission and Council are here for what is called a preparatory trilogue. If adopted in Parliament and by the member states later in the process, the new standards will demand online platforms to check the copyright requirements of all content uploaded onto their sites, such as YouTube videos. In 2012, YouTube's parent company Google released figures showing that one hour of video was uploaded to the platform

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every second. The equivalent to 60 hours of video per minute, 3,600 hours of video per hour, 86,400 hours of video per day represents a tenfold increase in the figures recorded five years earlier, in 2007.[17] The chair of the meeting reads some of these numbers out loud from a computer screen on the table in front of her. 'All of these numbers have been shared with you in advance', she says. By moving her fingers over a trackpad, she toggles between a list of bullet points and the four-column document that contains the negotiation text. 'Does anybody have any objections on how the article is framed?'

A woman next to Christian stands up to plug a phone charger into the wall. *Buzz. Buzz.* The phone vibrates again in Christian's hand. This time, he gets up and accepts the incoming call. '*Ja*?' he says, stepping out into the hallway.

Christian's phone is doing many things in this meeting. It buzzes. It rings. It can distract him. But it can also display information relevant to the text that is being negotiated. Its screen blacks itself out if it is looked at from the side, by someone who should not look at it. Its sounds blend into the soundscape of the meeting. It is, in the Latourian sense, an actant. What its presence in the room exemplifies is both the omnipresence and, concomitantly, the increasing dependence of technologies such as laptops and smartphones in modern professional life. This insight is confirmed and could be repeated by observations of virtually any of the hundreds of meetings that take place in Brussels every day. Christian and the other participants in the room all appear attached to their phones not just professionally but almost physically. The negotiation text becomes real primarily by being displayed and edited on a screen. The way the negotiators hold their bodies and their attention is impacted by the devices in front of them and in their hands. Cyborgs, Harraway would say.

[17] www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/google-says-one-hour-of-video-is-now-being-uploaded-to-youtube-every-second/2012/01/27/gIQAtubBdQ_story.html, accessed 29 October 2025.

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Christian, phone pressed to his cheek, is now in the hallway, leaning against the wall by a poster depicting a padlock over green lines of code. Below it, in red letters, is a message about new standards for data protection in the EU. He frowns. '*Das ist doch total egal*', he says into the mouthpiece, '*die Briten sind doch eh bald raus*'.[18] Moments later, he hangs up without saying goodbye and walks back into the room. Rubbing his phone up and down the lapel of his grey suit, he drops it, without looking, into his right chest pocket. Then he sits down, takes off his wire-rimmed glasses and squeezes the bridge of this nose. *Buzz*. His phone rings again. The ringtone is different. Christian mechanically reaches into his left inner pocket. A second smartphone appears. *Buzz*. This one is white. *Buzz*. '*Ja*?', he says, already pushing his chair back. Once again, he gets up and leaves the room.

On the other side of the table sits the chairperson, surrounded by assistants, trainees and member representatives of the Parliament. A quick-fire of political and legal statements flies across the room:

> So what do we put in column 4 of the document … let's put the Parliament option and if you have some issues with this you can come back to us again … Let's make our lives easier …and the text shorter, unless you have some more objections … I know this sounds terribly bureaucratic and not very exciting, but we need to reconsider point G of article 2.1. on the regulation.

'I think it is best if we wait until the conversation over there is done', a Parliament assistant says with a nod towards Christian's two colleagues, who are chatting. Christian comes back in, and the room quiets down.

'I should tell you all that the wording should read like this', says Christian, quickly reading lines from the screen in his hand.

'Ah wait, wait!', the chair calls rushing her fingertips over the keyboard, 'Wait! Slower, please, slower!'

[18] 'That does not matter. The Brits are going to be out soon anyways', translation by the authors. Christian here is referring to Brexit, the imminent leave of Britain from the EU.

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'You don't need to write it all down as I speak', Christian says, lowering his phone to look at her. 'I can circulate this later.'

'No, please, just a bit slower so I can already write it down now', the chair says. 'Please just one more time, slower.'

'Okay', he says, lifting his phone again and starting from the beginning. He manages to finish his dictation before another ringtone starts up inside his jacket pocket. *Vibrations. Soft buzzes.* He pats his chest and reaches into his left pocket, from which the white phone emerges. '*Ja*?' he says and again disappears into the hallway.

A few minutes later, he comes back in. Habitually, he takes off his glasses, squeezes the bridge of his nose and leans back in his chair. The air is thick. Energy seems to be seeping from the room. From somewhere around the table, a phone rings and Christian mechanically reaches into his right chest pocket to pull out his black phone. He lowers his chin and looks at it. The ringing has stopped, and the screen is blank. He presses a button and the screen lights up. No new notifications. *Wednesday, December 21. 10:45. Press home to open*. He presses a button on the side and the screen goes dark again. In a smooth movement, Christian lowers his left hand and lifts his right to check the other chest pocket. He pulls out his white phone and looks at it. He lowers his chin and looks at the phone. The phone is quiet. The screen is blank. He presses a button. The screen lights up. No new notifications. *Wednesday, December 21. 10:46. Press home to open.* He presses another button. The screen goes dark. Through constantly delivering instructions and updates into the room, Christian's two smartphones impact both the speed and direction of the meeting and the formulation of the text that will become its main outcome. What is more, the devices seem to have instilled in him certain ritualised hand and eye movements around finding both phones and scanning their screens for fresh information.

The trilogue negotiation we saw that November morning was made by the people sitting around the table, but it was also made by and via the digital devices in the room and their affordances. The

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negotiation was conducted both in the small, windowless room at Square de Meeus, but it also extended into other offices and sites of decision-making across town and beyond. The Brussels Bubble is an assemblage of people, buildings and devices that form 'hybrids of machines and organisms' in their constant 'becoming together'.

PROTOCOL PHONE

20 October 2021

A computational sequence of 0-1-0-1-0-1-

Logging Your Emotions and Moods. Health Checklist. Four hundred and ten, four hundred and eleven, four hundred and twelve.

While her phone is counting steps, Yulia is shivering. For the third time this afternoon, she is outside the delegates' entrance on the ground floor of the Europa building. For the third time, she wishes she had worn her jacket: winter is on its way and the temperature is dropping. There are no high-level meetings today, and there are few other people around in this part of the building, whose entrance is deserted. Here, white lines painted onto the grey concrete of the road demarcate parking bays, and a blue banner displaying the symbol of EU is propped up to shield the doorstep from unwelcome attention from the street. On the floor, there is a red carpet that begins on the pavement outside and stretches across the threshold and into the building. With its large square light-panels switched off, it looks like a film studio after hours. Yulia stands where the ministers, ambassadors and other state representatives usually do 'doorsteps': short briefings to journalists and camera teams about their intended statements in Council that day. She glances around. The sliding doors to the parking lane open and close as she shifts from one foot to the other, careful not to move too much and distort the step count. Yulia looks down at her phone. The doors slide open.

'*Bonjour Madame*', says a security guard doing the rounds of the building. 'Do you need anything, *Madame*?'

'*Bonjour, non, merci, ça va*', Yulia says, 'I'm just waiting for my phone to reset.'

'*Biensûr*,' says the guard, and keeps walking. Then Yulia's phone rings. 'Yes, I'll be right there,' she says, 'I'm just down at the entrance to double check the numbers before I send the email out.' She listens for a moment. 'Yes,' she says. 'Yes. One of the external delegates, yes. Anyway, I'll be right up.'

'Who asked you to count the steps this time?' Aino asks Yulia as they enter their office on the third floor of Justus Lipsius.

'Two of the external delegations coming for the summit tomorrow,' says Yulia.

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'Like that other time with the prayer rooms,' Aino replies.

'Yes,' Yulia says. 'Whatever helps!' She looks at Aino, and then both women nod in implicit agreement. Yulia walks over to her desk, sits down, presses some buttons on her keyboard and opens her email. *Home. Organise. Tools. Inbox. Calendar. Settings.* She places her iPhone – a few generations old – next to the keyboard and opens the built-in step count app. The screen lights up, the app refreshes and shows Yulia a number in black on fluorescent white with a small orange flame next to it. Yulia looks at the screen and then types the number into an email. The white light on the screen dims and then goes black. The room is quiet. Aino and Yulia work in silence, side by side, looking up and down, left and right from phone screen to computer screen. Now and then, there is a buzzing sound. A vibration from the phone. A ping from an incoming email.

'So,' says Aino, breaking the silence. 'How many steps is it from the doorstep to the meeting room?'

'About four hundred fifty,' Yulia says, 'That is, if you take the elevator.'

'Sounds about right,' Aino replies. The two women exchange a smile and then get back to their screens.

The main job of the protocol team is to keep avoidable trouble out of the negotiation room. Sometimes this means protocol staff like Yulia assuring a delegate about walking distances: in this context, the phone becomes a guarantor of providing such assurance. Yulia relies on the step-counting function of her phone to double-check the distance from the threshold of the building to the meeting room.

What Christian and Yulia's phones do and how they are used tell us about how work gets done in the EU today? Thanks to one phone, Christian can be in two places at the same time – but thanks to two, he can be in three. Without offering an explanation to the room, or irritating the other participants, he can get up in the middle of a negotiation to take calls in the hallway outside and then return to report and instruct what should happen next. Through the smartphone, what is happening at Square Meeus infiltrates other rooms and offices, whether up the road on Place Schuman or in Vienna, Dublin or Valetta, and the sites become connected in a momentary

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assemblage of people, places and information. Negotiation positions are formed with the help of laptops and smartphones, devices which enable the work of the meeting. At the same time, the participants in the meeting room are both engaged with the trilogue discussions around the table and – as evidenced by the movements of their fingers and thumbs at lap level – in following or contributing to conversations beyond its walls. This can create a sense of distraction and disengagement in the room, with the attention of the participants split between what is in front of them and what is in on their devices. And while the meeting started in an atmosphere of tense attention, as the minutes ticked by, that energy dissipated.

One effect of fusing with our technologies, Haraway wrote in her essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto', is that 'our machines are disturbingly lively, and we are ourselves frighteningly inert.'[19] While the phones in the rooms are buzzing, vibrating, chirping and sucking electricity out of the wall sockets, the institutional staff attending the meeting are following the lines of text that appear on their screens. They do give inputs and try to make amendments, but even then, they are holding their smartphones close, hunting out information and reading out lines from their screens. A similar picture would appear to anyone glancing into Aino and Yulia's office. Focused on their multiple screens, the two women sit and work in silence. Yet within the digital windows on their computers and phones, rooms are being booked, agendas are being set and delegates being notified of the procedures around their visit to the Council.

But the phones do more. For one thing, they push those who use them to make judgements about which piece of incoming information to attend to. When one of his phones rings, Christian must choose either to take the call or to ignore it. Besides the need to make such choices, the presence of the device is leaving habitual marks on the diplomatic bodies. When a ringing or dinging sound is heard in the room, most people can be observed to move their hands

[19] Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto, p. 120.

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to their pockets, pat their chests or check their bags. Such things matter in politics and diplomacy, both professions of intense choreography and curated movements. The scholar of diplomacy and international relations, Iver B. Neumann, for example, wrote about how the ways in which a diplomat moves, presents and positions their body is an important element in making sense of international relations. His focus was on how the diplomat's body is gendered and classed, a process which he saw as a 'constitutive factor of the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs/diplomatic] hierarchic order' and a differentiating factor in 'the diplomats' life chances', that is, career progression.[20]

What our stories from Brussels add to such analyses is a consideration of the extent the diplomatic body is technologised, and what this technologisation entails. Yulia's gut strategy is to walk the distance herself and then check her smartphone for confirmation. In Haraway's terms, Yulia's phone becomes her 'prosthesis': an extension of her own body and its competences. Yulia takes what the phone tells her seriously, trusting the tool as much as – or perhaps more than – her own mental ability. Waiting for it to reset and catch up, she shivers on the Council building's doorstep on a cold Brussels afternoon. A momentary sacrifice, of course, but a sacrifice nonetheless. This reminds of Clara and the need to go back and risk being late to an important meeting to get her phone.

If having or handling a certain technical tool becomes part of the habitual and embodied work practices of the Brussels Bubble – practices including negotiation, information sharing and support work like protocol work – then new lines of hierarchy and professional standing may emerge based on the capabilities of the technology and the individual's abilities to handle it competently. Take Clara. When we last met her ahead of her working group meeting, she had just realised she had forgotten her phone and was hurrying

[20] Neumann, I. B. (2008). The Body of the Diplomat. *European Journal of International Relations*, *14*(4), 671–695, p. 671.

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back to get it. So, what was it that Clara so desperately needed her phone for? And what will it do for her?

CLARA AND HER PHONE

14 October 2021

The phone charges overnight. At six-thirty or seven in the morning, its alarm rings to wake her up. Today, according to its calendar function, there is a thirteen-hour workday ahead, with the end of business scheduled for 7 p.m. Transported to work in her coat pocket, it stores all the important information about the day's schedule, all the contact details of the people she may need to talk to and the apps that allow her to access the intranet and emails of the Permanent Representation and the EU institutions.

Clara has never met many of the people whose information is stored on her phone. There is one woman in the Commission, for example, who she considers to be one of her top contacts in Brussels – even though they have only ever spoken on the phone, and she has no idea what she even looks like. She suspects she saw her in the back row at a Council meeting the other day, but she wasn't sure, so she didn't go over and say hello. Later that day, they spoke on the phone, but Clara felt too awkward to ask her. Clara suspects that the reason the Commission favours phone conversations over face-to-face meetings is efficiency. Think about it: a coffee conversation near Place Schuman takes at least forty-five minutes. You have to get over there, make your order and drink the coffee and then you might get too drawn into the conversation to make a timely getaway. A phone call is quicker. Or, you could do a video call and have your coffee at the same time and then just say, 'I have to go now.'

Walking to work, Clara passes a billboard outside a metro station showing a *Politico* ad for its morning newsletter, the *Brussels Playbook*. *Read it. Delete it. Look great in your meetings. The Playbook* arrived in Clara's phone inbox 07:10, among the first of the hundred or so emails she receives every day. Today's headlines:

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Merry Brexmas and a crappy New Year. 007 at Bozar. Not-so-transparent MEPs. Driving the day in Brussels: Brexit Hangover, MEPs with side hustles, a possible €36 million fine for Facebook over violations of the GDPR, the European People's Party reelects Manfred Weber as their group leader, MEPs Daniel Freund and Contanze Krehl celebrate their birthdays.

Clara walks into the building of her permanent representation, takes out her phone and puts it in silent mode. The laminated sign next to the elevator reads: *Floor etiquette: electronic devices are generally set to silent. Landline ringtones should be lowered as much as possible. Longer phone conversations should be taken in a meeting room, not at one's desk*. At nine, the first meeting starts. It is a virtual coordination meeting with the capital via videoconference. A reminder popped up on Clara's phone fifteen minutes earlier. All her appointments are saved in a calendar app. It is colourful and completely filled up. 'It looks worse than it is,' says Clara. She makes a call and keeps the phone plugged in at her desk. Then, at ten, the next meeting begins over at the Greek PERMREP. It's now confirmed that the external participant is indeed the Tunisian ambassador. Clara almost leaves her phone behind but goes back to her desk to get it. She is splitting Migration, the topic discussed at the meeting, with one of her colleagues, and has promised to live-text him any important updates. But she ends up using it much more than she expected because to everyone's surprise, the Tunisian ambassador, upset that the EU is meddling in Tunisia's internal affairs, launches into a one-hour monologue in French. The upshot is that Clara, whose French is far from fluent, must send text after text to her colleagues in the same room, asking for clarification on the points the ambassador raises. After the meeting, this text chain will help Clara summarise his monologue for a briefing with her own ambassador. After that: lunch, followed by a two-and-a-half-hour, one-on-one French class, offered free by the local Institute Francaise because the incoming French presidency of the Council (January to June 2022) is encouraging everyone to brush up on their French. For the class, which is online, Clara

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sits in a meeting room by herself and her phone is propped next to the computer screen.

After the French class, emails and phone calls back at her desk at the Permanent Representation. Clara plugs the phone into the charger. It buzzes. She can delete most emails that have come in, but around thirty need replies. She looks at her text message app and then calls one of the colleagues who attended the morning's meeting as she wants to compare notes before typing her report to send it to the capital. She also wants to know if her colleague's representation will support the proposition made in a Greek white paper circulated last week. Every couple of minutes, her phone screen lights up. Sometimes she glances at it, and sometimes she ignores it and it goes black again. Three hours of desk work – emails and phone calls – follow. Many of these communications are to people Clara has never met in person. She ends the afternoon by clicking send on her report to the capital – 'the capital', in this case, being the recipients of an email thread, which includes up to seven hundred addresses. Clara does not know most of the people behind them. Then a virtual reminder pops up for the last item on today's calendar: a planning meeting for this year's Christmas party. Clara drops her phone into her coat pocket, leaves the building and walks down Rue da Loi, past the *Politico* billboard and towards a bar on Place de Londres.

EXKI (SMART)PHONES

Any Day

The morning rush at the EXKi on Place Schuman is over. At close to ten o'clock, there are only a handful of people left in the big seating area behind the refrigerated cabinets of takeaway food. Four sit alone, and two are having a conversation. Combined, they are looking at or holding nine screens. The woman sitting by the window is speaking Spanish. She is looking at a smartphone in her left hand, and her laptop is open to her right. A man in a suit taps the fingers of one hand on one of the small round tables, while distractedly scrolling

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through Instagram with the other. In the corner by the bathroom, another man is looking at two screens at the same time. Nearby, two men, conversing in Italian, sit at a low coffee table, on which their phones lie screens open. Another woman is settling in at a small table and is in the process of taking her laptop out of her messenger bag when she stops to swipe the screen of her smartphone. Poppy jazz music is playing in the background. The coffee maker burbles. The suited man scrolling through Instagram sighs.

Then suddenly: light. The room brightens as the winter sun breaks through the blanket of clouds over Place Schuman. Some look up from their screens for a moment. Then they look back down.

SMARTPHONES AND SELFIES

Any Day

Mid-way between the annexe building, in the Meeus meeting room where Christian is shifting attention between his two phones, and the Council entrance where Yulia is counting steps, a smartphone is being held out at arm's length with its front-facing camera turned on. On the Espace Leopold, on the oval plaza between Place de Luxembourg and the front entrance of the European Parliament, two security guards clad in black clothes, hats and solid winter boots are taking selfies. Not much is happening at the Parliament today, as its members are on their monthly trip to Strasbourg. The smartphone camera is positioned to capture the guards' smiling faces against the façade of an elevated passageway connecting the Altiero Spinelli building with two wings of meeting rooms and the Parliametarium, the Parliament's public visitor centre. Like many official EU buildings, the windows of the passageway are decorated with EU banners and images. Today, they display messages prompting people to vote in the upcoming European elections. *#thistimeimvoting.eu because we need to work together to manage migration; because that gives our parliament the strength to hold power to account; because we need to tackle climate change now; because I want to protect my privacy; because I want the right to*

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live, love, study and work where I choose. #thistimeimvoting.eu. The banners with text are alternated with banners displaying photographs from inside the parliament's main meeting room: floods on a summery city centre square, the silhouette of a person holding up a phone and orange life vests discarded on the rocky shore of a grey beach. *Tap*. Smile. *Tap*. The camera flashes. *Click*.

In the Brussels Bubble, smartphones are used in myriad ways every day. Central staples in the conduct of policy and diplomatic work, they allow for the monitoring and sharing of information, in the canvassing of opinions, in agreeing on negotiation texts and reporting back to the capital. So deeply ingrained are they in how members of the Bubble organise their workdays through calendar apps and automated reminders, without which many typical interactions risk a collapse. Remember Haraway: Once we have entered and assimilated the 'polymorphous information system … we cannot go back ideologically or materially'.[21] In this ubiquitous everyday device, the EU's agenda points and the activities involved in delivering them are, to use Dittmer's term, 'becoming together'. Building further on Latour, what we are seeing is the formation of an assemblage, or multiple assemblages, in which the portable phone plays a crucial connective role. As such, it is not a passive tool. The connections it creates are multiple, complex and often unpredictable, and emotional and ideational as well as pragmatic and political in nature. The phone has simultaneously become an object of professional stress relief (as in a quick double-check of a negotiation position) and a source of professional stress (if it is lost or left behind, for example). It can be an attention-devouring tool – or one to hide behind in the relative anonymity of a coffee shop. It can extend light-hearted social relations (as when colleagues take selfies),[22] and gather input from those higher up the political or diplomatic hierarchy (as when Christian receives phrasing instructions during the trilogue) or take the temperature

[21] Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto, p. 130.
[22] On how the Brussels Bubble uses social media, see Chapter 4 'Boring Handshakes'.

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inside a tense diplomatic meeting (as when Clara texts colleagues during the Tunisian ambassador's monologue). In the hands of a Brussels professional, every phone is a shape-shifter.

In addition to professional concerns and the delivery of set tasks, the phone also impacts the physical and social habits of staff in Brussels, and the ways in which they consider themselves connected to their capitals, their colleagues and even their own bodies. For Clara, for example, it is normal not to know what some of her colleagues look like and to be unable to recognise them when she meets them in the flesh. Recognising someone physically no longer seems to be a prerequisite for feeling a deep sense of collegiality, trust and professional attachment in this diplomatic setting. This experience partially clashes with what Oliver, a long-term Council staff member, will later tell us about the Council's push to revert to in-person meetings as soon as possible after the pandemic.[23] One way of explaining this disagreement is that Clara only arrived in Brussels during the pandemic, so her observations are situated in the relatively recent aftermath of the crisis in 2021. Furthermore, she belongs to a younger generation of diplomats who have largely 'grown up' as professionals in a digitally saturated environment. The tension between these two approaches may also be explained by the difference between individual attitudes, experiences and uses of personalised digital devices and more institutionalised attempts to provide the context for interaction and regulations around the role of the digital tools within them. To get a sense of the latter, we once more go back to Clara.

REGULATING PHONES

14 October 2021

Clara, of course, has two phones: a work phone and a personal phone. There is a sticker on her work phone depicting the Ministry logo

[23] See the discussion of the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the social and working methods of the Brussels Bubble in Chapter 7, The show must go on(line).

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alongside a small serial barcode. At regular intervals, Clara and her colleagues must attend workshops, mainly online and self-conducting, on how to competently and securely handle their digital devices. The information material Clara is provided with comes from her capital and is issued to around a hundred of her colleagues in Brussels, as well as her country's embassy staff worldwide. Large sections of it have a particular focus on the use of smartphones. From the perspective of Clara's Ministry and of the EU institutions more broadly, the main problem with the ubiquity of the phone is that it is a security risk and therefore potentially the weakest link in an otherwise tightly controlled information environment.

Pages and pages of the information material are devoted to instructing their diplomats to regularly change their passwords, to never use the same password for their work and personal devices, to always know where their devices are, to charge them only with and through designated adaptors, to avoid unvetted universal serial bus (USB) ports as found in cafes, trains or waiting rooms, to switch off the Bluetooth function, to switch off the Wi-Fi, to never download any unknown software, to request a protective privacy screen cover so that no bystanders in meetings or public places can see what is on the screen, to sit or stand against a wall when using the device in public, to never to pack the phone into a check-in suitcase and, if need be, to wrap it in a protective plastic case when travelling to an uncontrolled and potentially hostile political setting, to place the phone in the safe if staying in a hotel room, to never give the device to someone else and to generally never leave it out of sight.

In addition to listing these instructions, the instruction material does two more things. Firstly, it tells the diplomatic staff what to do if something goes wrong: *Act! Report! Replace!* And secondly, it acknowledges the importance of the device to the diplomat. One of the manuals, for example, opens with the following statements: '*Our mobile devices have become more or less an extension of ourselves. More than 90% of adults keep their mobile phone within arm's reach*'. Above this text, there is an image of a man sweating, holding

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up an empty hand with his fingers spread around an invisible palm-sized smartphone. '*Unfortunately*,' the text continues, '*this "extension of ourselves" poses several potential security risks to the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs'] information and hence to our organisation*'.[24] The top three security risks are the device being lost or stolen, other people reading the screen's contents over the diplomat's shoulder in a public setting and espionage into what is shared on the device and its network connections through hacking, malware or phishing attacks.

To date, several incidents have been recorded that directly show the security risk of smartphone use in Brussels. In 2025, spyware was discovered on the phones of two MEPs serving on the security and defence subcommittee, highlighting the acute risk of digital espionage during sensitive EU negotiations. The incident, which took place amid rising geopolitical tensions and in the wake of trips to Israel and India, reveals how vulnerable high-level officials are to surveillance. Since 2022, the phones of over 250 MEPs tested positive for spyware, along with the Parliament President and other senior EU officials.[25] In Chapter 4, we illustrated how single European actors like Matteo Renzi themselves breached the rules of meeting-room confidentiality by live-streaming or tweeting from the closed negotiation room. But the most memorable case of outside interference may be when the Dutch journalist Daniël Verlaan hacked the EU Defence Minister's virtual Council meeting on 20 November 2020.

The incident occurred after the Dutch defence minister, Ank Bijleveld, tweeted a screenshot displaying the partial log-in details of the videoconference. It was, as spokesperson of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs later declared, a 'stupid mistake'.[26] Luckily for the EU

[24] Diplomatic training materials, shared with us by diplomatic staff in Brussels, October 2021.

[25] www.brusselstimes.com/934463/spyware-found-on-phones-of-meps-sitting-on-security-and-defence-committee, accessed 30 September 2025.

[26] Eggeling, K. A., & Versloot, L. (2023). Taking Trust Online: Digitalisation and the Practice of Information Sharing in Diplomatic Negotiations. *Review of International Studies*, *49*(4), 637–638.

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ministers at the time, the breach was immediately noticed because Verlaan, who was fortunately a Europe-friendly journalist, smiled and waved at the camera. The upshot of the incident was that some in Brussels saw it as a blessing in disguise. As one of Clara and Christian's colleagues explained during a webinar in December 2020: 'If you think about it, this [the hack] is the best thing that could have happened . . . the question how we can securely communicate via virtual tools . . . is experiencing a sort of revival now.'[27]

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, cybersecurity and secure communication have intensified as a source of major practical concern in and around the negotiation rooms of the Brussels Bubble. Much of this concern focuses on political espionage and outside interference by malicious actors, with recent cases reported both from the European Parliament and the European Commission.[28] Another element of it, which was evident in our field research, concerns the largely uncontrollable proliferation of the digital devices that enter EU official buildings every day. The resultant tightening of security means that in the Justus Lipsius and Europa buildings, for example, visitors find it hard to log into the Wi-Fi.[29] Other security measures imposed by the institutions include holding specifically sensitive meetings in 'bunker rooms' in which the phone signal can be 'jammed' by Faraday Cages, and another decidedly analogue yet very widespread practice is the installation of 'phone lockers' outside all big meeting rooms in the Europa, Justus Lipsius, Albert Borschette and Berlaymont buildings; however, as in Winner's description of the Long Island road overpasses,[30] such material solutions come neither without value judgement nor political neutrality. One Council employee explains that the use of phone lockers works effectively in lower-level technical or

[27] Fieldnotes from webinar under the German Presidency of the EU Council, 15 December 2020.

[28] *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/article/spy-european-commission-brussels-warning-staff/, accessed 30 September 2025; *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/article/parliament-defense-subcommittee-phones-checked-for-spyware/, accessed 30 September 2025.

[29] Fieldnotes, 9 December 2019.

[30] Winner, Do Artifacts Have Politics?

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diplomatic meetings, but becomes more difficult at the Ministerial level, and almost impossible at the Head of State level, since no one is going to 'tell [Emmanuel] Macron that he can't take his phone into the meeting room'.[31] In the autumn of 2025, several types of phone lockers were installed outside the main meeting rooms on the fifth and seventh floors of 'the lantern' of the Europa building. Some display the names of country delegations like Cyprus, Denmark, Germany or Bulgaria, while others have a laminated note stuck to them marked *Ministers Only*. Just as access to meetings is hierarchically ordered and tightly controlled in and around the Bubble, so is the storage of the delegates' personal digital devices if they are headed into meetings with sensitive points on the agenda.[32]

The stories collected in this chapter reveal how references to phones in the context of the Bubble can also be understood as references to internal organisation, to accepted and established operating procedures, and to hierarchies and politics. Rather than addressing the question of who would pick up the proverbial Kissinger phone, we have investigated the increasing ubiquity and largely unquestioned everyday use of smartphones to consider what they reveal about the organisation of political and diplomatic work in the EU. And one of our central findings is this: that the Brussels Bubble of today could not function without the buzzes and beeps of personalised portable digital devices. As both part of the infrastructure that enables the continuation of the EU's work, and as active participants in making and shaping this work, they are part of the Bubble's bloodstream. Indeed, it is perhaps apt that phones are often called cells: as individual 'blood cells', within the system, each device is not just a passive infrastructural tool enabling the flow of information, but a co-producer of the political messages and ambitions of the 'body' as a whole. In interacting with the diplomatic staff, they form part of a cellular network: an assemblage of people, practices and things in which no element can exist in its assigned role without the presence

[31] Fieldnotes, 18 October 2021. [32] Fieldnotes, 2 October 2025.

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of the others. We have called the smartphone a shape-shifter and shown its chameleonic characteristics in everyday settings. Thinking with Latour, we could also call it a 'quasi object', that is, an object that both circulates and creates its own circulation: an actant that transforms those who use it while simultaneously being transformed by them.[33] When Yulia uses her smartphone to count the steps from the doorstep to the meeting room, it becomes a measuring instrument. When Christian uses his two phones to conduct two or even three conversations at the same time, they become devices that simultaneously split his attention in one room and double his presence across others. When phones are used to take selfies or text colleagues, they become storage, memory and communication devices; when they are idly used in coffee shops, they become portals into another world or shields behind which to hide inside the current one.

Thinking about the smartphone's multiple abilities in the context of how it interacts with the work of the Brussels Bubble, it is clear that its presence or absence has impacts on the rules, procedures, identities and sites of the Union's work and those who perform it. What we can ultimately take away from this is the empirical evidence and theoretical elucidation behind a phenomenon that can be casually observed in Brussels and in many other professional settings across the world in recent years. On every meeting room table, there are smartphones. On every lunch table, there are smartphones. In coat pockets, jacket pockets, suit pockets and pant pockets, there are smartphones. In handbags and backpacks and on lanyards around shoulders, there are smartphones. Thus are smartphones fused to the objects diplomats use, as well as to their bodies – and thus does the EU official sitting, standing or walking around with a phone in their hand become the most ubiquitous sight to be observed in and around the Brussels Bubble today.

[33] Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press, p. 238.

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Why does this matter, for both the practice of international relations and global governance and the theories written about it? If we accept the stories of Christian, Yulia and Clara, what we are left with is the observation that digital devices are vital cells in the bloodstream of the EU's political and diplomatic 'body'. There is no more 'analogue' Brussels Bubble – and therefore no longer a purely 'analogue EU'.

To observe and theorise about what happens inside the EU in the digital age, we must pay attention to long-posed questions concerning power, status, economic interests, external relations and the internal clashes of national identity or gender politics. But we must also consider how these dynamics interact or 'become together' with now-omnipresent and indispensable digital technologies. In 2008, Iver Neumann closed his article on 'the body of the diplomat' with the argument that we need more research on how international relations are necessarily embodied, and on exploring what differences our attention to the body makes.[34] His argument stands. But what we suggest, on the basis of the insights presented in this chapter and the book as a whole, is an addition to his argument that calls attention to how the 'bodies' of international relations are not only gendered and classed but also digitally and technologically mediated. If we accept this, we may be well advised in international relations to consider both the diplomatic *body* and the diplomatic *cyborg*.

[34] Neumann, The Body of the Diplomat.

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