# Conclusion

Almost a hundred years ago, between the two World Wars, the Austrian writer and passionate advocate for a united Europe Stefan Zweig reflected on how science and technology could capture the spirit of an age. Looking back at the life of Erasmus of Rotterdam in the fifteenth century and comparing it to his own time, Zweig observed: 'The only other epoch comparable with this turn of the century is our own, with its sudden diminution of space and time by means of the telephone, wireless, automobiles and aircraft, through its abrupt change in the rhythm of life.'[1] For Zweig, acceleration and 'the diminution of space' constituted more than technological progress: they created what he called a 'European sense of community'. Suddenly, the cities of London, Paris and Vienna were not merely national capitals but trans-European spaces of modernity.

If Zweig were to stroll through today's European Quarter in Brussels, he might recognise the convivial buzz created by its cosmopolitan attitudes and its crowded cafés, where the muted beeps of phones and laptops enable constant communication through the collapsing of space and time. Yet, pausing near Place de Luxembourg, he might also notice an ambivalence: that while twenty-first century technology promises connectivity and access, it also produces disconnection and crisis. Alongside free Wi-Fi on every corner, the Brussels Bubble of today might well give Zweig the sense that deep, contemplative conversation has been sidelined in favour of a constant stream of digital distraction.

It is in this ambivalence that our book's argument begins and ends. Like Zweig, we take seriously the notion that technology is not

[1] Zweig, S. (1965 [1934]). *Erasmus of Rotterdam*. Viking Press, p. 25.



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simply a backdrop to European governance, politics and diplomacy but a vital component of its rhythm, community, work output and sense of 'Europe'.

Too often today, digital technologies appear in studies of the EU as either the object of the EU's regulatory power (GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), the Digital Services Act)[2] or as a geopolitical or geoeconomic challenge that calls for more 'digital sovereignty'.[3] What is less visible and often overlooked – but which this book is extensively uncovering – is how these technologies *blend* into the everyday practices of officials, diplomats, interpreters, institutional staff and parliamentarians through their strategies, networks, identities, emotions and even their bodies.

We know this from Jack, Sabine, Clara, Daan, Filip, David, Louise, Oliver, Emma and other diplomats, interpreters, EU officials, seconded bureaucrats, interns and ambassadors who have shared their experiences with us over more than half a decade of academic research. Jack embraces the convenience of his phone, while Sabine worries about the blurring boundaries between her work and her private life. Louise discovered during COVID-19 that the rise of video calls reinforced ideas of protocol, speaking order and professional and social hierarchies. Others highlight the risks of leaks, disinformation and surveillance. Taken together, their experiences reveal that digitalisation is not an external force acting upon EU politics but rather a situated process woven into its rhythms and routines. In this fusion of people, tools and institutions, broader theoretical patterns come into view. From this, five interrelated theoretical insights follow that we will unpack in this concluding chapter.

[2] Mügge, D. (2023). The Securitization of the EU's Digital Tech Regulation. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *30*(7), 1431–1446; Newman, A. L. (2020). Digital Policy-Making in the European Union. In Wallace, H., Pollack, M. A., Roederer-Rynning, C., & Youn, A. R. (Eds.), *Policy-Making in the European Union* (pp. 275–296). Oxford University Press.

[3] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en, accessed 13 January 2026.

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1. The EU is a *virtual* social field: The European Union must be re-thought not only as a social field but as a digitalised or virtual field whose politics, authority and legitimacy are inseparable from the infrastructures through which the Union is practised and experienced every day. Its daily politics unfold through platforms and infrastructures – from WhatsApp groups to file-sharing systems and video calls – that mediate how power is exercised, and how relationships are built and sustained. The EU is not simply a regulator of digital technologies but a polity made possible by them. This requires re-thinking core concepts in European studies, such as what we mean by 'integration', and what counts as a 'field'.
2. In Brussels, social media operates as a symbolic economy of peer recognition – what we call the *Bubble effect* – that connects insiders and distances outsiders. Likes, mentions and retweets circulate as gifts of acknowledgement, visibility and belonging, reinforcing insider networks rather than dissolving or expanding them to a broader European public. This requires us to reframe familiar ideals of European 'connection', 'community' and 'democracy' as social and political boundaries that are continually redrawn through digital communication and interaction.
3. *Bureaucrats and diplomats are cyborgs*: In the EU, we hardly find politics or negotiations in a purely face-to-face form. In this sense, diplomats and EU officials are now conducting their work as cyborgs: their authority, presence and emotions are mediated through devices that extend their bodies, enable and restrict their agency and shape their sense of self. Phones, inboxes and screens are not accessories to diplomacy. Just like meeting rooms, interpretation booths and flags, they are part of its infrastructure. This challenges our understanding of representation, negotiation and the embodied performance of democratic and political life.
4. *The digital is negotiated every day:* Digitalisation is not an external force shaping politics and global governance, but a socially negotiated process embedded in local routines, professional habitus and geopolitical constraints. In the context of the EU, it is produced and contested within institutions and professions rather than imposed from outside them. While the conclusions presented here are specific to the dynamics of the Brussels Bubble, the general argument that digitalisation is a negotiated process can be readily applied to other institutional and global settings.

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5. *Studying the digital world necessarily involves studying the analogue world and vice versa*: None of the above points, or the overall insights presented in this book, would have been possible without direct, embodied, face-to-face research in and with members of the Brussels Bubble. Without ethnographic attention to how diplomats and officials actually experience the digitalisation of their professional world, we could not have understood how the digital reshapes relations, practices and hierarchies on the ground. This is why we call for an extension of the current 'practice turn' in international relations literature to more seriously consider how the everyday world in which international politics unfold is digitally mediated.

While empirically developed and situated in the 'village' around Place Schuman, our argument has implications beyond Brussels. Like other multilateral hubs – New York, Geneva and Addis Ababa – the EU's political work is increasingly mediated by platforms designed elsewhere. Leaders and officials negotiate sanctions, climate targets or trade agreements via Microsoft Teams, draft legislation in Word and Excel and circulate talking points on WhatsApp. Given the current political attention to questions of tech dependencies and the longing for European digital sovereignty, the irony is evident: while the EU seeks to regulate and assert control over the digital, it is deeply reliant on infrastructures controlled by global, but mostly American, tech firms. Russia's war against Ukraine has underscored both the fragility and resilience of this arrangement, as cybersecurity and hybrid warfare now sit alongside sanctions and weapons deliveries in the repertoire of EU responses.

For International Relations, global governance scholarship and EU studies, our findings blur familiar dichotomies between sovereignty and interdependence, formality and informality, strategy and emotions. They also speak specifically to the political sociology of the EU and other multilateral bureaucracies: post-COVID and with the rise of AI, there is no 'return' to a pre-digital baseline. Instead, digital and physical practices are increasingly hybrid, reshaping authority, confidentiality and professional identity. The wider lesson is clear.

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To understand international and regional organisations today, we must attend to the digital infrastructures through which politics is lived and experienced.

## THE EU AS A *VIRTUAL* SOCIAL FIELD

The 'Brussels Bubble' is a multilateral hub, alive with constant negotiation and coordination. Hosting more than 180 diplomatic missions and multiple multilateral organisations, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, the Belgian capital is a place where European politics and integration is enacted. In sociological terms, it is a transnational space, where 'there are people (some permanent, others part-time) competing to define European policies, norms, and instruments as well as the skills of legitimate definition', as Didier Georgakakis astutely puts it.[4] Or to quote Merje Kuus, Brussels is 'a fascinating scene' of styles and a particular professional habitus.[5] In Brussels, social recognition is acquired in a variety of ways, which include certain ways of dressing and behaving. Eurostyle – an aesthetic of collared shirts, business suits, polished shoes, gestures and elegant postures – is visible from Zaventem Airport to Rue de la Loi. In this sense, Brussels is not just a geographical place, it is a social field where certain forms of politics are performed and made meaningful. Political sociologists have helped us understand Brussels as a field of Eurocratic power: a structured social space where actors compete for symbolic, social and institutional capital, and where legitimate forms of 'Europeanness' are defined and reproduced.[6] The EU's institutions are not impersonal

[4] Georgakakis, D. (2011). Don't Throw Out the "Brussels Bubble" with the Bathwater: From EU Institutions to the Field of Eurocracy. *International Political Sociology*, *5*(3), 331–334; see also Mudge, S. L., & Vauchez, A. (2012). Building Europe on a Weak Field: Law, Economics, and Scholarly Avatars in Transnational Politics. *American Journal of Sociology*, *118*(2), 449–492.

[5] Lewicki, P. (2016). European Bodies?: Class and Gender Dynamics Among EU Civil Servants in Brussels. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, *25*(2), 116–138.

[6] Keleman, D. R. (2002). The Politics of 'Eurocratic' Structure and the New European Agencies. *West European Politics*, *25*(4), 93–118; Georgakakis, D., & Rowell, J. (Eds.). (2013). *The Field of Eurocracy: Mapping EU Actors and Professionals*. Springer;

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bureaucracies but social worlds, animated by professional networks, shared norms, educational habitus and tacit hierarchies. Our contribution builds directly on this insight, but also extends it into the digital realm.

As we show, Brussels is increasingly a virtual social field, and it makes little sense to talk about everyday EU politics without acknowledging that much of it now unfolds online. The 'field' is no longer limited to the physical spaces of the European Quarter or national capitals: it is stretched, mediated and reconfigured through digital infrastructures and platforms. This reconfiguration requires us to re-think both the topography and temporality of a field in which influence circulates through WhatsApp groups as much as through working groups, and recognition is performed as much via retweets as through corridor gossip.

What does this mean theoretically – and how does it challenge our existing conceptions of the EU as a political system? Informal chats and preparatory work are no longer confined to the corridors of the Berlaymont, national ministries or cafés around Place Schuman. They are carried out through WhatsApp messages, texts, emails, posts and video conferences. It is still true, as the ethnographer Peter Lewicki notes, that being an effective part of the EU machinery involves 'maintaining networks' with officials and Heads of Unit in the European Commission in exchange for information. Influence still hinges on contacts with 'stakeholders' from 'the car industry', the 'biofuel industry' or 'farmers', and it is still cultivated 'on an informal basis during meetings after working hours (dinners, conferences, meetings, cocktails, briefings)'.[7] Yet today, most of these networks

Cohen, A., & Vauchez, A. (2010). Sociologie politique de l'Europe du droit. *Revue française de science politique*, 60(2), 223–226; Vauchez, A. (2008). The Force of a Weak Field: Law and Lawyers in the Government of the European Union (for a Renewed Research Agenda). *International Political Sociology*, *2*(2), 128–144; McNamara, K. R. (2015). Imagining Europe: The Cultural Foundations of EU Governance. *Journal Common Market Studies*, *53*(1), 22.

[7] Lewicki, P. (2017). *EU-Space and the Euroclass: Modernity, Nationality and Lifestyle Among Eurocrats in Brussels*. Transcript, p. 106.

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and meetings are at least partially digitally mediated, and this mediation subtly transforms the very meaning of the words 'network', 'meeting' and 'negotiation'. Being in the loop no longer solely depends on physical presence or whispered exchanges but on the ability to navigate a constant flow of digital texts, drafts and attachments. It is still about 'knowing what's in the pipeline', but the content of the pipeline now consists of notes, sound bites and fragments scattered across Word, PowerPoint and Excel files.

This transformation invites us to re-think EU politics in the digital age. What Frédéric Mérand calls political work – 'a set of strategic and emotional practices that enlarges the room for agency vis-à-vis institutional or diplomatic constraints'[8] – is increasingly performed through screens. Digital mediation changes both the form and affect of this work: immediacy, visibility and performativity now sit side by side with the temporality of paper documentation and behind-the-scenes diplomacy.

Where many sociologists and political scientists have emphasised how the EU embodies 'rationality' or secularity – a 'European doxa of the North-West' connected to visions of modernity and 'Europeanness',[9] for the people we have been following, digital technologies seem to both facilitate and challenge this interpretation. As one MEP put it to us during a day of observation, 'communication in politics these days increasingly needs to be done through and supported by visual aids – maybe an infographic, a good photo or a little video – in order to grab and sustain more attention and emotional attachment. Politics today is less and less about rational communication of facts, and more about emotional and visual communication.'[10] This assessment reflects a growing worry in the field: that it is not just 'political work' but the very institutions and diplomatic systems themselves that are being reshaped by pervasive

[8] Mérand, F. (2022). Political Work in the Stability and Growth Pact. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(6), 847.

[9] Lewicki, *EU-Space and the Euroclass*, p. 232.

[10] Fieldnotes, 19 December 2019.

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connectivity, the need to grab attention and ever-shorter response times.

This shift has aesthetic, procedural and geopolitical consequences. One month after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Digital Markets Act was finalised on 25 March 2022. Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Bréton proclaimed that it would mean the end of the digital Wild West: 'Now we're taking back control.'[11] Such proclamations cast the EU as a guardian of digital sovereignty, protecting its citizens from US surveillance capitalism and Chinese digital authoritarianism. Yet Russia's war also made it clear that Europe's vulnerabilities are as digital as they are territorial. Cyber-attacks, leaks and hybrid warfare now target the infrastructures underpinning European security and everyday bureaucracy. Indeed, as we finalise this manuscript, stories about a hack of the GPS system of the Commission President von der Leyen's plane and the sighting of numerous unauthorised drones have disrupted air traffic in various European transportation hubs. From across the Atlantic, harsh statements claim the EU is limiting freedom of expression by regulating what can be said on online platforms. What keeps the EU functioning smoothly in everyday life also makes it vulnerable during times of geopolitical tension.

This tension forces us to ask: what do 'European integration', 'digital sovereignty', or 'taking back control' mean in light of these observations? How can the EU claim to regulate Big Tech when the software of US companies like Amazon or Microsoft, and the platforms of Mark Zuckerberg are the very channels through which European leaders and officials negotiate everything from Brexit to the Digital Services Act? What happens when the EU legislation that seeks to control very large online platforms (VLOPs) is drafted and communicated using those same platforms? Or when the European Commission proves unable – or unwilling – to enforce its own digital

[11] www.siliconrepublic.com/business/eu-digital-markets-act-dma-big-tech-rules-competition-europe, accessed 26 January 2026.

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rules and uphold its fundamental rights, under pressure from global corporate or geopolitical interests?[12] These questions do not only concern us: they also concern the IT managers and digital development staff of the EU institutions. As tensions in global trade and security mount, they sit in their offices in the Justus Lipsius or the Berlaymont and work hard to imagine and develop a different digital future.

What is clear is that we cannot tackle today's political questions without recognising the EU's deep, everyday reliance on digital technologies. The social field of European integration is now inseparable from the digital infrastructures that sustain it. From the way officials communicate, meet and gather news, to how they draft legislation – in short, how they live and work – everyday digital mediation is constitutive, not incidental. Sometimes, these dynamics mirror broader social transformations in how digital tools organise work, identity and recognition. At other times, what happens in the Brussels Bubble reflects the specific sensitivities of diplomatic life within the hierarchies of the EU field.

This reframing is relevant for broader debates about the nature of the EU as a polity. Scholars have long wrestled with whether the EU should be understood as a 'normative power', a postmodern empire,[13] and more recently, a digital empire,[14] a late-sovereign construction,[15] a regulatory state[16] or an emergent federal union.[17] Our ethnography suggests that each of these labels captures only part of

[12] www.reuters.com/technology/eu-says-it-is-assessing-tech-cases-not-impacted-by-new-us-administration-2025-01-14/., assessed 14 January 2025.

[13] Zielonka, J. (2008). Europe as a Global Actor: Empire by Example? *International Affairs*, *84*(3), 471–484.

[14] Bradford, A. (2023). *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology*. Oxford University Press.

[15] Walker, N. (2018). Late Sovereignty in the European Union 1. In N. Walker (Ed.), *Relocating Sovereignty* (pp. 521–550). Routledge.

[16] Majone, G. (2014). From Regulatory State to a Democratic Default. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *52*(6), 1216–1223.

[17] Fossum, J. E. (2017). European Federalism: Pitfalls and Possibilities. *European Law Journal*, *23*(5), 361–379.

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the picture. The EU is not fully postmodern in the sense of being fluid and borderless, nor federal in any stable constitutional sense. It is, rather, to a large degree, a digitally mediated polity – one whose sovereignty, authority and legitimacy are continuously negotiated across both physical and virtual domains. The infrastructures that connect European institutions are also infrastructures of power and vulnerability which shape how 'Europe' is imagined, enacted and felt.

In this sense, digital technologies do not simply accelerate communication within an existing polity: they *redefine what a polity is*. The EU becomes not only a network of treaties and institutions but also a living collective of connections – constantly negotiated and constantly online.

This brings us to our next key insight: how social media platforms operate in the Brussels Bubble not just as tools of communication, but as instruments of recognition, legitimacy and belonging within this virtual social field.

## THE BUBBLE EFFECT

In 2006, the former UK ambassador to Lebanon, Tom Fletcher, wrote a book called *The Naked Diplomat* in which he called for less formal, less secretive and more engaged diplomacy in which diplomats embraced social media and blogging to connect with ordinary citizens.[18] Fletcher coined this approach 'naked' diplomacy. Drawing on his own positive experiences, Fletcher proposed a real, honest, person-to-person engagement: a way of talking *with* people rather than *at* them. The idea was that diplomats should be establishing connections and cultivating a sense of authenticity on social media. Tweets and personal updates would make diplomacy more transparent and more legitimate, he argued. For Fletcher, 'naked' meant authentic, and authentic meant sharing your everyday life as an ambassador or diplomat on social media.

[18] Fletcher, T. (2006). *The Naked Diplomat: Understanding Power and Politics in the Digital Age*. Harper Collins.

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In theoretical terms, Fletcher's argument expresses the optimistic strand in the booming digital and public diplomacy scholarship, which sees social media platforms as tools for increasing transparency and legitimacy. For diplomats, it allows for more direct engagement with the public, adding weight to the authenticity and effectiveness of messages.[19] Social media promises genuine relationships with foreign audiences and enables direct communication with people previously excluded from negotiations, while videoconferencing and instant messaging provide new discussion arenas. This body of work has been invaluable in mapping the new communicative possibilities of digital tools.[20]

However, as many of the same scholars (and some of their critics) note, the focus on success stories and revolutionary change sometimes overlooks the mundane, uneven and contested character of digitalisation.[21] The literature on hybrid media systems and institutional practices shows that there are limits to mass outreach.[22] We have learned how it changes global North–South dynamics, and how it may have an equalising potential, but we have also learned how it echoes the division between the digital haves and the digital

[19] Sotiriu, S. (2015). Digital Diplomacy: Between Promises and Reality. In B. Corneliu & M. Holmes (Eds.), *Digital Diplomacy* (pp. 33–51). Routledge; Bjola, C., & Jiang, L. (2015). *Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the Digital Diplomatic Strategies of the EU, US and Japan in China*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy, 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan US.

[20] Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (2015). *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. Routledge; Manor, I. (2019). *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy* (P. Seib & K. Fitzpatrick, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan.

[21] Bjola, C., & Pamment, J. (2018). Introduction: The 'Dark Side' of Digital Diplomacy. In C. Bjola & J. Pamment (Eds.), *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism* (pp. 1–10). Routledge; Eggeling, K. A. (2023). Digital Diplomacy. In N. Sandal (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. Oxford University Press; Hedling, E. (2023). Emotional Labour in Digital Diplomacy: Perceptions and Challenges for European Diplomats. *Emotions and Society*, *5*(1), 29–47; Duncombe, C. (2019). The Politics of Twitter: Emotions and the Power of Social Media. *International Political Sociology*, *13*(4), 409–429.

[22] Chadwick, A. (2013). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press.

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have-nots.[23] Meanwhile, officials and diplomats themselves have appeared to be ambivalent. Some ambassadors have become tech-savvy, while others worry it is the 'end of diplomacy'.[24] In this literature, we also find broader analyses of digitalisation as a potential game-changer for international relations, facilitating global coordination and communication.[25]

Today, we know that social media and digital technologies do not make diplomacy 'naked'. As our ethnography shows, they rarely live up to the utopian or dystopian visions that often frame them. In Brussels, political posts that go viral are the exception. Generally, social media communication blends in with – and quietly reshapes – the routines of negotiations in ways that are gradual rather than revolutionary. Our research shows that except for a handful of political leaders and MEPs, for most diplomats and officials in Brussels, social media is less a channel to reach the citizens of Europe than a way of navigating the confines of the tightly connected ecosystem of EU officials, diplomats, journalists and think-tankers that forms the Bubble.

Remember Jack, who 'never, never replies' when someone tweets at him, and Pierre, who insists that while European officials' social media posts should reach farmers in rural France, but 'they often only reach across the street'. Posts about policy milestones, jargon-heavy updates full of acronyms or self-referential humour rarely explain the EU's relevance to ordinary citizens. Instead, they reinforce the EU's image as a self-contained world inside which

[23] Masters, L. (2021). Africa, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and Digital Diplomacy: (Re)Negotiating the International Knowledge Structure." *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 28(3), 361–377; Barrinha, A., & Renard, T. (2017). Cyber-Diplomacy: The Making of an International Society in the Digital Age. *Global Affairs*, 3(4–5), 353–364.

[24] Owen, T. (2016). The Networked State and the End of 20th Century Diplomacy. *Global Affairs*, 2(3), 301–307.

[25] Cross, M., & Melissen, J. (2013). *European Public Diplomacy: Soft Power at Digital Diplomacy*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy, 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan US.

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opinions differ: some see this as proof of a democratic deficit, while others view it as simply how professional communication now works.

Some may argue that this resembles a 'filter bubble', but this metaphor fails to capture the full social meaning of how social media communication works in Brussels, where social media is less about differentiating oneself from the outside world than about affirming one's place within it. A well-timed tweet at an EU summit, a shout-out to a colleague, a photo from a cultural event or a carefully worded statement about a legislative success – all act as small gestures of recognition and belonging, circulating within a digital field where status, identity and legitimacy are performed and reaffirmed one post at a time. It is a question of homophily.

Politics has always involved the exchange of gifts in the form of gestures of goodwill, favours and recognition. Social media amplifies this tradition. A retweet becomes a nod of approval; a like, an acknowledgement of shared goals; a mention, a form of public recognition. In the Brussels Bubble, these digital gifts carry weight. Success depends not only on working the right rooms and acquaintances but also on accumulating likes, retweets and insider recognition. In this sense, social media within the Brussels Bubble functions as a symbolic economy. If algorithmic homophily reduces diversity of content, it is professional social dynamics that structure visibility and impact. This points us towards another dimension of the Bubble effect beyond the circulation of insider recognition: the performative and emotional labour that officials, representatives and diplomats invest in curating themselves online.

If recognition is the 'currency' of the Bubble, then identity work is the process by which that currency is produced.[26] Like the dynamics of gifting and recognition that Deepak Nair uncovered among the ASEAN Secretariat bureaucrats, we find similar forms of emotional labour among Brussels-based bureaucrats and diplomats – only here, it also

[26] See Nair, D. (2020). Emotional Labor and the Power of International Bureaucrats. *International Studies Quarterly*, *64*(3), 573–587.

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unfolds through the management of their digital selves. This brings us to a parallel tension in the ethnographic material of the previous chapters: the difficult negotiation between authenticity, strategy and risk in online identity performance. In her work on multi-player online games, Sherry Turkle explores the fluidity of online identities that enable people to experiment relatively freely with different personas and interactions.[27] What we have found, in contrast, among our research participants is chiefly an ambivalence that expresses itself in the form of a love–hate relationship to digital tools. For some EU officials, the screen is more constraining than liberating. They may wish to be more authentic online, but they often find themselves sacrificing their authenticity in the service of strategy, national interests or institutional constraints. Meanwhile, the pressure to appear relevant and responsive keeps them constantly curating their digital selves.

Some diplomats, like Daan or Jack, find that this work can be enjoyable. They are not alone: Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates, in their sociology of the effects of 24/7 access to email, showed how professionals rationalise the resulting diminishing autonomy, framing it 'not as an encroachment, but as indispensable to helping them achieve flexibility and accountability in their work'.[28] But there is more than autonomy at stake: there is the curation of self. Officials like Emma must balance formality and personality, accessibility and aloofness. A misjudged post – or an overly casual remark – can destroy credibility. Think of Peter from President Tusk's press team, and the infamous Theresa May 'cake tweet' during the Brexit negotiations. Social media magnifies risk as much as reward.

The combination of reciprocity (the symbolic gift economy of likes and mentions) and performance (the curation of digital national, institutional and personal selves) highlights the dual pressures that

[27] Turkle, S. (1996). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

[28] Mazmanian, Melissa et al. "The Autonomy Paradox: The Implications of Mobile Email Devices for Knowledge Professionals." *Organization Science* 24, 5 (October 2013): 1338.

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produce the Bubble effect: recognition among peers, on the one hand, and identity management in an environment of constant public visibility and political risk, on the other. These pressures are intertwined: the same gestures that earn symbolic capital can simultaneously constrain self-expression and intensify reputational hazards. What may appear as a trivial tweet or like is part of a complex economy of visibility and authority, reconfiguring the social dynamics of the Brussels Bubble and shaping new patterns of interaction and recognition within it.

Fletcher's idea of 'naked' diplomacy proves incredibly difficult to realise in practice. But if we take 'naked' not in Fletcher's sense but in the sense of Erving Goffman's 'naked interaction'[29] – the raw, unmediated, face-to-face encounter in which body language and physical handshakes are all there is – then it is worth asking whether diplomacy has ever been fully naked. In Brussels, the analogue meeting has almost vanished,[30] and screen-worlds now mediate even the informal interactions that once defined diplomatic preparation. Rather than 'naked diplomacy', we see 'synthetic situations'.[31] When WhatsApp groups become the site for circulating compromise texts, or when Clara forgets her phone and prefers to arrive late rather than manage without it, we see that purely face-to-face interactions have been replaced by something else. Social media has turned the EU into a partly mediatised field of symbolic recognition (the digital gift) and identity performance (the curated self).

## CYBORG DIPLOMACY

In the Brussels Bubble, the diplomatic body is now inseparable from its technological extensions. Leaders, officials, experts and diplomats

[29] Goffman, Erving. "The neglected situation." *American Anthropologist* 66, no. 6 (1964), 135.

[30] Eggeling, K. A., & Adler-Nissen, R. (2021). The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy: Scopic Media and the Digital Mediation of Estrangement. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *1*(2), ksab005.

[31] Ibid.

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no longer arrive 'naked' to the negotiating table: they cannot strip themselves of technology, because technology partly makes them who they are. The Permanent Representations around Place Schuman and the corridors and meeting rooms of Justus Lipsius and Berlaymont vibrate with buzzing phones, emails, texts, calls and scrolls. The informal exchange of views, so cherished in diplomatic circles (and studies), no longer looks the way it used to. When the national COREPER ambassadors prepare their weekly agreements, the first version of their conclusions may be written into the body text of an email. As one PERMREP spokesperson explains, it is quick and immediate and littered with 'typos and such things'. A few hours later, the official version follows, properly formatted. But that first message matters most: it ensures that everyone is informed not just in time, but – crucially – before the media. Internal communication is paramount because trust depends on it.[32] In the EU, politics is enacted daily by a combination of humans and machines. In the Brussels Bubble, this has three interconnected dimensions: the body, the self and time.

The diplomatic body is classed, gendered and racialised.[33] But it is also *technologised*. Recent accounts of diplomacy stress the embodied performance of authority.[34] Yet in Brussels, the digital world is already an extension of the physical body. There is no need to think about chips planted in brains when you can think of Jack crossing Rue Froissart with his phone in hand. Talking about the importance of digital devices, he told us about the amount of time he spends on his phone every day. 'You know, you can check that now on these things,' he said and glanced at the phone on the table in front

[32] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019.

[33] Neumann, I. B. (2008). The Body of the Diplomat. *European Journal of International Relations*, *14*(4), 671–695; Towns, A. E. (2020). 'Diplomacy Is a Feminine Art': Feminised Figurations of the Diplomat. *Review of International Studies*, *46*(5), 573–593; Neumann, I. B. (2019). Diplomatic Representation in the Public Sphere: Performing Accreditation. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *14*(4), 447–466.

[34] Standfield, C. (2020). Gendering the Practice Turn in Diplomacy. *European Journal of International Relations*, *26*(1 Suppl.), 140–165.

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of him. 'I checked it. And the other day it was up to something like nine hours.'[35]

Walking through the streets, cafés and meeting spots of European Quarter, you see officials chatting, scrolling and typing. Some are just passing time, but the phone appears glued to the hand and the smartwatch is firmly tied to the wrist. Has the EU diplomat and official evolved into a cyborg? The idea of the cyborg, central to Donna Haraway's work[36] and to science and technology studies more generally, captures not just the synthesis of flesh and machine but the political implications of technologically mediated embodiment.[37]

If technologies reshape the body, they also impact the *self*. Among the most striking aspects of the work life of the Brussels Bubble, beyond the omnipresence of technology, are its pragmatic and affective impacts on the lives of its inhabitants.[38] Digital devices are more than work tools: they also afford moments of fun and downtime. However, as Jack underscores in one interview, these moments can become addictive:

> Don't you just hate it sometimes? ... I think that scrolling through Twitter is such as a passive thing ... that leaves you with a horrible feeling. It's like eating at McDonald's. In the moment it feels good and satisfying. But you also don't quite know why you're doing it, and just a few minutes after it's done, you feel empty and hungry again.

Jack's remarks about how he ultimately regrets the time he 'wastes' on social media reflect a sentiment expressed by several of our participants. Sometimes, their excessive social media use leaves them feeling hollowed-out and uncomfortably aware of the energy and

[35] Fieldnotes, 28 March 2019.

[36] Haraway, D. (1991). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In D. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149–181). Routledge.

[37] Balsamo, A. (1995). Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture. *Body & Society*, *1*(3–4), 215–237; De Mul, J. (2003). Digitally Mediated (Dis)Embodiment. *Information, Communication & Society*, *6*(2), 247–266.

[38] See also Eggeling, K. A. (2025). Evocative Screens: Ethnographic Insights into the Digitalization of Diplomacy. *International Political Sociology*, *19*(1), olae046.

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opportunities they regularly lose through 'doom scrolling'. And while their digital devices can offer a means of temporary escape from the boredom of a meeting, surreptitiously using them to check a vacation destination, text a family member, mindlessly scan for new messages or to repeatedly check their social media accounts does not always feel rewarding. Here, the diplomat's cyborg condition becomes affective as well as embodied. Recent work on digital affect underlines how digital practices generate ambivalence: pleasure, distraction, frustration and emptiness.[39] What Jack describes as the 'McDonald's' effect is part of the emotional economy of digital life, in which satisfaction and regret coexist. This points to how the self is continually modulated by platforms that promise connectivity but sometimes deliver discontent.

Digital technologies also reorganise *temporality*, just as Zweig noted more than a century ago. One of the most common experiences among EU officials, diplomats and interpreters is that digital technologies change both their workflows and their sense of time.[40] This echoes findings from other political ethnographies that 'connectivity brings a sense of interruption and distraction that fragments experiences of time into increasingly smaller units'.[41] The fragmentation of time erodes distinctions between work and leisure time: one diplomat explains, 'the email has become the new text message', and everyone expects him to reply to emails almost immediately.[42] The shift became even clearer during the pandemic, when the migration of work online made constant availability the norm.

This shift is not only experiential but structural. Media sociology and political communication research point to the

[39] Paasonen, S. (2021). *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*. MIT Press.

[40] For an interesting perspective on how the acceleration of EU politics fits badly with its institutions, see Vauchez, A., & White, J. (2025). The Crisis of Long-Termism: Time and Independence in the European Union. *West European Politics*, 1–25, In Press.

[41] Murphy, S., Hill, T., McDonagh, P., & Flaherty, A. (2023). Mundane Emotions: Losing Yourself in Boredom, Time and Technology. *Marketing Theory*, *23*(2), 275–293.

[42] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019.

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acceleration of time and the erosion of boundaries between work and leisure as defining features of digital modernity.[43] For officials and diplomats, whose success depends on timeliness and responsiveness, the collapse of temporal boundaries creates new vulnerabilities and new forms of obligation. Many feel they must always be 'on', and that their value is measured by the speed of their replies. Remember Christian, mechanically reaching for one or the other of his smartphones in the breast pockets of his suit.

So are the permanently digitally assisted and digitally augmented EU officials, diplomats, interpreters and journalists ever *just* people? Their information is distributed across several cities in other countries and continents, and their presence is simultaneously here and elsewhere. While many EU officials plunge headlong into the world of the Bubble and come to distance themselves physically and emotionally from the 'country they know best', their minds are always still partially connected to 'the capital' back home. To call them mere humans would be inaccurate: they are also nodes in a vast geopolitical, and virtual network.

In theoretical terms, this final observation draws us beyond embodiment and affect and into ontology itself. Digital and social media infrastructures make EU officials, interpreters and diplomats into distributed presences, simultaneously localised in Brussels and extended across global circuits. Communication scholars describe this as a 'connective presence'[44] or a 'networked individualism',[45] whereby people exist through their attachments to technological systems. In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle called it the 'tethered existence' of modern life. In the EU, diplomacy and politics have not

[43] Wajcman, J. (2014). *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*. Chicago University Press; Rosa, H. (2013). *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Columbia University Press.

[44] Licoppe, C. (2004). 'Connected' Presence: The Emergence of a New Repertoire for Managing Social Relationships in a Changing Communication Technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *22*(1), 135–156.

[45] Rainie, H., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. MIT Press.

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lost their human dimension but have been reconstituted as a networked, sociotechnical practice in which bodies, selves and temporalities are co-constituted by digital technologies.

## THE DIGITAL IS NEGOTIATED EVERY DAY

Over the course of this book, we have offered an account, grounded in a practice-oriented political sociology and ethnographic observations and interviews, of what governance and policy-making looks like inside the European Union today. We have shown that on the one hand, 'digital diplomacy' does not replace traditional multilateral politics, and that, indeed, its transformative effects are often overstated, but, on the other hand, scholars have underestimated the ways in which it gradually reshapes everyday routines. This creeping transformation constitutes our fourth key insight. Rather than treating the digital as a prefix or an add-on to European politics, diplomacy or governance, we have revealed how digitalisation itself is negotiated in a process we would call the *diplomatisation of digitalisation*.

This perspective resonates with developments across the social and human sciences, which show that technologies are not simply adopted but interpreted, contested and enacted within situated contexts.[46] Thinking in terms of *diplomatisation* highlights how EU officials domesticate and reframe digital tools to preserve, stretch or rearticulate professional norms as their work becomes digitalised. In 2005, Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall argued in *Essence of Diplomacy* – with a nod to Graham Allison – that diplomacy has certain enduring characteristics which 'can be analyzed as the mediation of universalism and particularism, and that this dualism finds different expressions in different historical contexts'.[47]

Responding to Jönsson and Hall, we note that multilateral diplomacy – like the world it serves – has always been shaped by the

[46] Orlikowski, W. J. (2007). Sociomaterial Practices: Exploring Technology at Work. *Organization Studies*, *28*(9), 1435–1448.

[47] Jönsson, C., & Hall, M. (2005). *Essence of Diplomacy*. Springer, p. 25.

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tools of its time. From pen and paper to telephone and telegram, from fax to social media and artificial intelligence, the reproduction of international and supranational institutions has always been interwoven with technological change. In this book, we have traced how digital tools intersect with human practice, and shown how emails, smartphones and online platforms now accompany handshakes, lunches and late-night negotiations. Rather than telling a tidy story of technological 'revolution' or efficiency gains, we focused on the messy, human side of change: how digitalisation reshapes EU politics through routines, habits and subtle negotiations of authority, visibility and attention.

Over recent decades, digital technologies have quietly transformed the political and diplomatic scene in Brussels. Typewriters and filing cabinets have given way to digital repositories and cloud storage. Information that once relied on face-to-face encounters now circulates through emails, intranets and instant messaging platforms.[48] These tools became central during the pandemic, when videoconferencing not only supplemented but temporarily replaced in-person meetings. As meetings spread across screens and internet cables, officials were not so much 'swept along' by technological change as forced to negotiate its meaning as part of their everyday work. As we saw, the changed conditions of working in the Brussels Bubble during COVID-19 highlighted how the use of technology is intimately, legally and politically linked to the existing rules of the game in Europe. Digitalisation does not replace politics: it complicates and merges with it.

Our concept of *blended diplomacy* captures this entanglement of social and technological processes.[49] Technology is not simply a

[48] Kuus, M. (2023). Bureaucratic Sociability, or the Missing Eighty Percent of Effectiveness: The Case of Diplomacy. *Geopolitics*, *28*(1), 174–195; Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy.

[49] Adler-Nissen, R., & Eggeling, K. A. (2022). Blended Diplomacy: The Entanglement and Contestation of Digital Technologies in Everyday Diplomatic Practice. *European Journal of International Relations*, *28*(3), 640–666.

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backdrop to EU politics but something officials *do* and *feel*. Screen addiction, for example, provokes irritation and fatigue. Yet, the digital also induces reflexivity. In their use of digital tools, officials draw two kinds of boundary: horizontal ones that separate 'real' work from peripheral tasks, and vertical ones by which they rank one another's status, competence and worth.[50] New distinctions and hierarchies in EU decision-making are produced and performed through these technologies. Consider interpreters like Louise, whose relative invisibility in the booth embodies how 'equality' among member states is performed through individual labour. When meetings move online and interpretation is dropped, these hierarchies shift again. Through such boundary work, the EU itself is remade – subtly but profoundly.

The story of the EU in the digital age is not one of inevitability. Digital technologies are neither simple facilitators of progress nor existential threats to European integration. Their impact is negotiated: gradual, uneven and deeply intertwined with both the rhythms and rituals of political work and the political realities of the world beyond the Brussels Bubble. If screens are replacing paper dossiers and corridor chat in the negotiation space, this transformation is not unfolding seamlessly, because technology does not simply *happen* to the EU: it is adopted, questioned, resisted and reshaped. Its meanings are forged by those who use it.

This insight begs new questions about what it means to *do* European politics in a digitalising world. Digital tools like shared documents, WhatsApp groups or virtual platforms are not mere conveniences but integral components of negotiation and politics. They shape who speaks, who listens and how positions are tested, revised and recorded. A well-timed text message can influence a negotiation as much as a carefully crafted intervention on the floor; using multiple smartphones during a closed door meeting can allow – and ban – outside voices from shaping agreements; and the collaborative editing

[50] Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, Blended Diplomacy, p. 535.

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of a draft can become a political battleground.[51] Yet these tools also provoke concern about procedural decorum: do the old rules still apply when a formal meeting room is replaced by squares on a screen? Can hierarchy, confidentiality and equality be maintained in digital settings? Here, the digital becomes a site of tension in which norms are simultaneously broken, stretched and reaffirmed. The principle of confidentiality, for instance, remains a cornerstone of European negotiation. It endures not despite technology but alongside it, as officials decide when – and, sometimes more profoundly, *if* – digital tools should be used at all.

The negotiation or 'diplomatisation of digitalisation,' then, is not about technology replacing bureaucracy or politics. It is about technology compelling the EU to re-imagine itself. This is not a revolution but an unfolding negotiation over the nature of European governance. Scholars of European Studies have long pointed to economic policy, agricultural policy, defence, security or culture as markers with which to measure the status of the closeness of the Union and the process of European integration. Our ethnography suggests that technology and its use should be added to this list. The cautiousness we observed among officials is not mere resistance to innovation: it reflects a deeper anxiety about what digitalisation means for their own identities, for professional norms and hierarchies and for the legitimacy of European decision-making itself. At the time of completing the manuscript for this book, this process is being fundamentally probed and tested by explosion in artificial intelligence and the pressure on the institutions of the EU to bow to the inevitable and update their systems. 'We have to offer delegates and officers the kinds of tools they ask for', one of Oliver's colleagues tells us during our visit in the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU in the autumn of 2025. 'They look to the American and commercial

[51] Adler-Nissen, R., & Drieschova, A. (2019). Track-Change Diplomacy: Technology, Affordances, and the Practice of International Negotiations. *International Studies Quarterly*, *63*(3), 531–545.

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providers. And we need to make sure to develop comparable local systems – otherwise our role as the main meeting place for European negotiators will be compromised.'[52]

## A PRACTICE TURN FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

Our arguments rest on the conviction that ethnographic immersion and close-up observations and interviews are indispensable to the understanding of how politics unfolds in a digital age. With the rise of digital media, much social science research has turned to big data and the experience of distant digital data methods as a way of understanding and explaining social life. In the context of researching global governance and diplomacy, a rich research tradition has developed that frames livestreams, virtual meetings and social media posts as political and diplomatic performances. While this has been part of our work, what the analyses in preceding chapters show is that without tracing the mundane, affective and embodied experiences of how EU officials handle and use their digital devices, we would have missed the subtle negotiations through which such tools are normalised, resisted or re-signified in practice. What may appear as uniquely personal – a diplomat's screen fatigue, a spokesperson's frantic emailing or a policy officer's discomfort with online interaction – is also indicative and constitutive of global processes.[53] The digital does not confine itself to individual or community experience: it scales up and out, embedding itself in the infrastructures, rhythms and hierarchies of international institutions.

This duality of the deeply personal and the globally systemic means that future theories of global governance, international political sociology, European integration and multilateral diplomacy must take the digital seriously, not as an external attachment but as something woven into both bodies and institutions in everyday practice.

[52] Fieldnotes, 2 October 2025.

[53] Barrett, M., & Orlikowski, W. (2021). Scale Matters: Doing Practice-Based Studies of Contemporary Digital Phenomena1. *MIS Quarterly*, *45*(1), 467–472.

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By foregrounding the situated practices through which technology is negotiated, we hope to contribute to and extend the practice turn in international relations and EU studies.[54] Our findings suggest that a practice-oriented sensitivity offers not merely a way to describe *what diplomats and officials do*, but a lens for understanding how the digital reorganises relations between actors, reshapes boundaries of expertise and visibility and alters the temporalities of European, and indeed global politics.[55] Classic conceptions of practice in international relations and diplomatic studies stress 'competent performance' and the 'coming together' of bodies, material artefacts time and context.[56] What our research adds is the insistence on technology as a phenomenon that requires changes in our understanding of professional competence and of what constitutes the practices of diplomacy and global governance today.

Crucially, a practice theoretical ethnography attuned to the role of the digital also helps us to navigate across *scales*: to move between micro-observations of bodies hunched over phones in Brussels cafés and macro-questions about institutional transformation and strategic (in)dependencies, or between the personal frustration of doomscrolling and broader questions of legitimacy, equality and inclusion in multilateralism. Our call, then, is for more empirically grounded, ethnographically sensitive studies that do not take the digital at face value but trace its entanglement with the embodied,

[54] Kuus, M. (2013). *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*. John Wiley & Sons; Eggeling, K. A. (2021). At Work with Practice Theory, 'Failed' Fieldwork, or How to See International Politics in an Empty Chair. *Millennium*, *50*(1), 149–173; Adler, E., & Pouliot, V. (2011). International Practices. *International Theory*, *3*(1), 1–36; Pouliot, V., & Cornut, J. (2015). Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda. *Cooperation and Conflict*, *50*(3), 297–315; Bueger, C., & Gadinger, F. (2015). The Play of International Practice. *International Studies Quarterly*, *59*(3), 449–460.

[55] Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, Track-Change Diplomacy, pp. 531–545; Pouliot & Cornut, Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy, pp. 297–315; Eggeling, At Work with Practice Theory, pp. 149–173.

[56] Adler, E., & Pouliot, V. (2011). *International Practices*. Cambridge University Press; Dittmer, J. (2017). *Diplomatic Material: Affect, Assemblage, and Foreign Policy*. Duke University Press.

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affective and organisational dimensions of global governance. If the practice turn opened the door to understanding the everyday of international politics, the next step is to account for how the everyday itself is becoming digitally mediated.

Stefan Zweig's understanding of European unity was linked to the improvement of transportation and communication technologies. In his eyes, the invention of electricity, the automobile or the rise of air travel should make people feel closer to each other. He also wrote about Brussels as a place of cultural crossroads: 'A few hours transport one from Brussels, the heart of its iron arteries, to Germany, France, Holland, and England; and from Belgian ports all countries and all races are accessible across the pathless sea. The area of the land being small, it provides a miniature but infinitely varied synthesis of the life of Europe.'[57]

A similar faith in connections thrives in the Brussels Bubble today. This modern, if chaotic city,[58] driven by technology and progress, appears to bridge the divide between nations, fostering a network of supranational citizens. For Jack, Louise, Jakub and Alfred, their native countries of Ireland, France, Slovakia and Denmark have become 'the countries they know best.' Brussels, the EU and Europe have become their home, and the rhythm of the Brussels Bubble has become their way of life. Like all practical aspects of their lives in the city, their attachment to Brussels is and will likely remain temporary. Yet the outlook it has instilled in them – an outlook they help shape every day – will endure long after they have left Place Schuman and Rue de la Loi.

For our participants, Europe is not a utopian promise, but a lived reality made and remade every day. Digitalisation, the source of both

[57] Stefan Zweig, *Emile Verhaeren*, quoted from Dessy, C. (2021). Cross-Border Narratives and Life Writing: Émile Verhaeren by Stefan Zweig and Its English Translation in Wartime. *Comparative Critical Studies*, *18*(supplement) 34.

[58] Jaeger, A. (2025, 2 October). Brussels Is the Heart of Europe, and It's Not Going Well. *The New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2025/10/02/opinion/brussels-belgium-european-union.html, accessed 9 October 2025.

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relaxation and stress, anticipation and nostalgia, has become part of this reality. When officials feel better-equipped to do their jobs – when emails, texts and social media help them tune into the 'right frequency' as Daan put it – digitalisation seems to ease some of what Hans Magnus Enzensberger called the 'arduous labour' of Brussels life. But when, like Jack, they fail to notice oncoming traffic because they are preoccupied by their screens, it can feel like digitalisation has ousted something fragile and precious.

Zweig might well recognise this ambivalence. He described the 'golden age of security'[59] in Vienna before the First World War as an era in which habits, institutions and the rhythms of life felt stable. But while technologies like the automobile, the electric light and the telephone enabled progress and the 'flow of goods, people or ideas', they could also destabilise its foundations.[60] Enzensberger, too, was ambivalent. Closing his book on Brussels, *The Gentle Monster*, he quotes Hannah Arendt's warning from 1975 that post-democratic dangers lurk when governments become bureaucracies governed neither by law nor people but by 'anonymous offices or computers' ruling by 'depersonalized domination'.[61] Enzenberger wrote this in 2011, eleven years before the American software company OpenAI launched ChatGPT, the generative artificial intelligence tool that imitates human language. While members of the Brussels Bubble are acutely aware of how technologies including AI confront and challenge their work, the Brussels we have studied does not conform to Arendt's dystopian fear. Contrary to much public discourse, including but not limited to Eurosceptic and populist voices, the EU is not run

[59] Zweig, S. (2009). *The World of Yesterday: Memoirs of a European*. Pushkin Press, p. 23.

[60] Van Dam, F. (2024). Safety as Nostalgia. In G. Blok & J. Oosterholt (Eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Safety and Security: Imaginaries, Discourses and Philosophies That Shaped Modern Europe* (pp. 177–196). Routledge, p. 180.s.

[61] Arendt, H. (2011). *Responsibility and Judgment*. Schocken Books, cited in Enzensberger, H. M. (2011). *Brussels, the Gentle Monster or the Disenfranchisement of Europe.* Translated by Martin Chalmers. Seagull Books, p. 70.

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by anonymous machines or faceless offices. It is sustained by real people who struggle, adapt and re-imagine their work with and via the digital tools that increasingly shape their everyday world. This reflexivity, as our ethnography has shown, is not just a coping mechanism but a political resource.

The struggle surrounding technology presents an ambivalent promise for Brussels in the digital age. The Brussels Bubble is technologised, saturated with emails, tweets and WhatsApp messages, but it is not anonymised or depersonalised. Rather, it is fragile, contingent and intensely human. The directions in which this reflexivity will take European governance remain uncertain. Just as not everyone in Brussels is equally committed to democracy, transparency or rights, not everyone understands technology in the same way. Some embrace digitalisation with optimism; others resist it, or approach it cautiously, strategically or even with indifference. If there is hope, it lies not in a consensus but in the very fact of this ongoing negotiation – messy, emergent and uneven. The Brussels Bubble may never deliver the kind of certainty that belonged to what Zweig nostalgically called the 'golden age of security'. But it does show us that Europe's future will continue to be negotiated at the intersection of political ambition, unfolding crises, private dreams and the everyday practices of those who inhabit them. We believe that what needs to be taken seriously as part of this mix is the use and continual development of technology. Just how life and work in the Brussels Bubble in the digital age will unfold remains an open and empirical question that confronts those who govern the EU as much as it does those who study its governance.

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