4 'Boring Handshakes'

In Brussels, social media works as a gift of insider recognition.

We can begin with Peter, the man behind the Council President's social media updates – who ensures they appear before anyone else's. As a member of President Donald Tusk's press team, Peter's job involves not just crafting the right words to achieve maximum traction on the platforms, but knowing exactly when to hit 'tweet'. In Brussels, timing is everything – especially when the heads of state or government gather. By the time Peter joined Donald Tusk's press team in 2014, he was already familiar with the rhythms of the European Council, having worked in the office of its first president, Herman Van Rompuy. During his presidency, Van Rompuy became known as the 'haiku master' because he would compose haikus during summit meetings, as a way of reflecting their mood.

Peter's precision matters because the stage he works on could not be grander: the European Council summits. At least six times a year, the national leaders of all twenty-seven states file past the cameras and journalists gathered in the Council's atrium on their way to the negotiating rooms. These gatherings set the tempo of European integration and represent the EU's supreme decision-making body. Behind closed doors, the toughest issues – from the euro crisis to relations with the United Kingdom, from Russian aggression to how to manage a pandemic – are wrestled with. In moments of crisis, the meetings grow tense, stretching late into the night and sometimes into the next day. At the end of the process, the leaders emerge with their official 'Conclusions', a carefully worded text agreed by all twenty-seven member states. Yet the real work of the summit begins long before the meeting rooms are prepared and the cameras roll in the form of weeks of drafting,

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bargaining and communication planning carried out by diplomats and officials who prepare the ground for their leaders' big Brussels moment.

Summits in Brussels are held inside the Europa building, the glass-and-steel cube at the heart of the European Quarter. From the outside, its facade blends in with the uniform office blocks around it, but step inside and the atmosphere shifts. The main meeting room is bright and colourful: the Belgian painter Georges Meurant's rainbow-coloured block pattern decorates its ceiling, doors and carpet, with the same design repeated in the corridors, the elevators and even the cafeteria. Commissioned to symbolise the diversity of the member states, the colours bring warmth and dynamism to a space that is – for security reasons[1] – completely windowless.

Yet the Europa building is not just a backdrop of colour and symbolism, it is also a pressure cooker, in which every word and every message must be carefully managed. For Peter, the real challenge is not just communicating about the summits once they are over but maintaining strict social media discipline while the negotiations are still unfolding. One incident in particular has stayed with him: the 2015 October meeting of the European Council. As the meeting drew to a close, Peter recalls, he rushed to tweet Tusk's closing comment, which was already prepared and primed to send – only to discover that Matteo Renzi, then Italy's prime minister, had beaten him to it, announcing the Council's conclusions – and his country's role in them – ahead of everyone else: '*Agreement in the European Council on refugee quotas. Italy's position was decisive. Proud of our work #EUCO' (@matteorenzi, October 15, 2015)*. Just before that European Council meeting, Peter had gathered the social media team to stress the importance of being the first to announce any decision. But Renzi's premature announcement confirmed that despite his best efforts, the reality is that some European leaders are eager to claim

[1] https://samynandpartners.com/17_e-books/Europa_en/files/assets/basic-html/index.html#1, accessed 29 October 2025.

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credit for their roles in negotiations and often break the news first from inside the meeting room.

Renzi's tweet illustrates how eager the members of the European Council can be to communicate successes directly to their domestic constituencies, thereby proving their value as champions of their country. As Peter later explains, 'we can't wait until the meeting has ended, because then you have some of the young prime ministers, they're in there in the meeting with their phone and they know the number of retweets that they can get if they're the first ones to break the news'.[2]

Yet social media, as this chapter will show, serves purposes far beyond taking the credit for negotiation successes or broadcasting messages to domestic constituencies and citizens. While such public, outward communication and agenda-setting is often assumed to be social media's primary function in diplomacy and politics,[3] the reality is more intriguing. Social media is woven into the fabric of everyday professional and personal relations for officials, diplomats and journalists in Brussels. It extends the conversations that begin in cafés, corridors and canteens of the European Quarter, reinforcing connections and the feeling of being 'in the know'. By engaging primarily with updates and news within the Bubble, posts rarely travel beyond its virtual borders – and nor are they meant to. This is what we might call the 'Bubble effect'.

In Brussels, a social media post can function as a ritual sign of recognition; a gift that can hold great symbolic meaning, even when it goes unnoticed by the wider world; a show of political strength to allies or rivals; a marker of identity; a source of distraction or gossip – or, when it goes wrong, a misunderstanding or a blunder. These functions often blur into one another, just as the people behind the

[2] Fieldnotes, 26 March 2019.

[3] Bjola, C., Cassidy, J., & Manor, I. (2019). Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *14*(1–2), 83–101; Cull, N. J. (2013). The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in US Public Diplomacy. *International Studies Review*, *15*(1), 123–139.

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accounts juggle several different digital identities. Sometimes the biggest challenge lies in working out whether someone is joking or being deadly serious. That ambiguity is part of the Bubble's online life – and it is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

GIFTS OF RECOGNITION

When Peter joined President Tusk's press team in 2014, the chemistry between the two men was good, and Tusk soon promoted him. Peter enjoyed working on the big defining issues for Europe: migration, Brexit, Russia, Ukraine and the financial crisis.[4] In the early days of Peter's appointment, he and Tusk agreed on a social media strategy that rested on a clear division of labour. Tusk would do the political messaging from his account, while Peter would do what he called, the more 'boring stuff' from his. This meant that Peter's account, while it had a significant followership, did not have the heft to compete with bigger accounts like that of the Secretary-General of the European Commission, Martin Selmayr (nicknamed The Beast of Berlaymont or Darth Vader for his brutal negotiation style) or the Vice President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas. Peter's account, as he likes to explain, was 'boring, but it was meant to be boring'.[5] 'There's an instant satisfaction in getting a lot of retweets,' he says. In the Brussels Bubble, Peter is hardly alone in keeping score like this, and charting one's online popularity is not limited to his office. Having more followers than other rival accounts 'warms your heart' says Peter. 'But that's of course not the purpose. I mean, the purpose is to . . . shape the political context, of the positions . . . Whatever they may be. Sometimes it's of course just to break news. Sometimes it's purely informative. A deal has now been done on the multiannual budget. We've now agreed on this and this and this'. The point is simply, Peter explains, to have your name associated with a positive decision.[6]

The 'boring' tweets were by far the most common during Peter's time on Tusk's team. As per their agreement, Peter did not have to ask

[4] Fieldnotes, 26 March 2019. [5] Ibid. [6] Ibid.

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Tusk's permission to post 'boring' or 'neutral' tweets. For a European Council President, social media is often all about saying 'I attended this meeting and I met this person'. It is the 'recognition of the other person's importance and it also shows that you are active', says Peter.

> With so many meetings with heads of state and government, where nothing really comes out of it, we post 'good meeting with blablabla, discussion of . . .' and then just list the topics. And they get no retweets, maybe one hundred, but it's nothing, and it's okay, because they're meant to be a kind of respect for the counterpart. Very often, it's a very important point of the meeting, to be seen meeting with the president of the European Council, especially when it's third countries, say the North Macedonia Prime Minister or, I mean, it would be a disaster for them if they were not somehow recognized.[7]

On 12 June 2018, a tweet was sent from Tusk's account recognising the work of Union member Greece and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, which read: *Sincere congratulations to PM @tsipras_eu and PM @Zoran_Zaev. I am keeping my fingers crossed. Thanks to you the impossible is becoming possible*. Such a tweet functions as a symbolic gift of recognition: a way for Tusk to acknowledge Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev. The political and diplomatic corners of social media are full of such recognition tweets. According to Peter, they are the 'boring' stuff of everyday political communication. But they are also important as tools to make one's partners and counterparts feel seen.

To understand their deeper significance, it helps to turn to the work of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss and Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman. Mauss argues in his classic essay 'The Gift', first published in 1950, that the gift comes first, and reciprocity (and thus exchange) second. According to Mauss, drawing on studies of archaic and indigenous societies, the impulse to give freely, to offer something without immediate expectation of return, is what initially binds

[7] Ibid.

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individuals and communities together. It is only after this initial act of generosity that the expectation of reciprocity emerges, gradually giving rise to the norms and practices of exchange. Over time, the inevitable imbalances created by these generous expenditures – some gifts given, others not yet returned – lead to the development of more formalised systems of calculation in the form of money and trade. In this view, economic life as we know it is not the foundation of social relations, but rather a complex outgrowth of the human tendency to give, and the social obligations that follow. These insights have inspired generations of diplomacy and international relations scholars,[8] not least because the gift is inherently political. It is, for example, a way to defuse possible hostility, and a 'fundamental gesture or procedure of public recognition between human groups [that] establishes them as uniquely human and capable of forming alliances and conventions, thus constituting the very genesis of the political relationship'.[9] That is why refusing gifts is often 'tantamount to declaring war'.[10]

In a nod to Mauss, Goffman proposes that interpersonal rituals encompass the reciprocal exchange of conversational gestures and gifts that collectively create a "little ceremony".[11] In his 1967 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman analysed how personal trust and political order are built on the social glue he called 'face-work'. Face-work refers to the work involved in making our everyday actions and bodily gestures consistent with our self-image

[8] Kustermans, J. (2019). Gift-Giving as a Source of International Authority. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *12*(3), 395–426; Wong, S. (2024). Applying Graeber's Extension of Mauss' The Gift to the Study of International Relations. In D. V. Kumar (Ed.), *Revisiting Social Theory: Challenges and Possibilities* (pp. 50–62). Routledge; Neumann, I. B. (2021). Diplomatic Gifts as Ordering Devices. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *16*(1), 186–194.

[9] Harcourt, B. E. (2015). *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age*. Harvard University Press, p. 15.

[10] Mauss, M. (1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge, p. 13.

[11] Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. Basic Books, p. 63.

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in society, including constant vigilance against 'interactions [that] threaten face'.[12] Central to this interaction is the recognition of the 'face' of the other. But while Mauss and Goffman showed how face-giving works in moments of direct interpersonal interaction, such as in pedestrian traffic, it continues in Brussels not just in meetings and high-level summits but also online.[13] What we discover in the online spheres of the Brussels Bubble speaks to recent studies of recognition and status within international relations, such as August Danielson and Elsa Heding's research on virtual summitry and 'family photos'[14] or Deepak Nair's work on 'face saving' among ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) diplomats. In concordance with what Nair found in face-to-face interactions, we see that social media exchanges in Brussels allow those who generate them to present and recognise one another, which is arguably one of the basic functions of diplomatic exchange.

Peter is thus involved in the deliberative crafting of the face of the self and of others: he is both the one amplifying the public persona of Donald Tusk, and the one gifting wider recognition to other actors, as in the case of Zoran Zaev of North Macedonia, above. The purpose is to achieve respect and credibility. A tweet by Tusk, then, is not merely a message but a carefully curated instance of face-work, signalling affiliation, solidarity or subtle negotiation. Social media is a virtual stage on which European integration unfolds – not just in formal negotiations but in the seemingly casual gestures of liking, commenting or sharing. These reciprocal practices of giving and receiving recognition on social media are important for what Mauss would call 'the

[12] Møller, A. H. K., Adler-Nissen, R., Golovchenko, Y., & Eggeling, K. A. (2024). The Social Aesthetics of Digital Diplomacy. *International Political Sociology*, *18*(3), olae027.

[13] In International Relations, see Nair, D. (2019). Saving Face in Diplomacy: A Political Sociology of Face-to-Face Interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *European Journal of International Relations*, *25*(3), 672–697.

[14] Danielson, A., & Hedling, E. (2022). Visual Diplomacy in Virtual Summitry: Status Signalling during the Coronavirus Crisis. *Review of International Studies*, *48*(2), 243–261.

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morally sanctioned gift cycle of everyday life'.[15] When social media accounts are used successfully, they help European leaders and officials in the internal recognition game. But not every attempt lands as intended, as illustrated by Peter's story of a tweet gone wrong.

LOSS OF FACE

On 19 September 2018, Peter had flown to Salzburg, Austria with Tusk and the team for an informal summit of the European Council. It was a beautiful, sunny September day. The Brexit negotiations were at the top of the European political agenda, which was surrounded by a constant firestorm of hype. How often did the press and media announce that the next meeting of EU leaders marked a deadline, or a turning point or the final chance for negotiations? Yet time and again, the dramatic assertions heralded nothing more than yet another chapter in the seemingly endless tale of Brexit.

Nonetheless, among British journalists, the sense of a breakthrough in the Brexit negotiations was building up.[16] Perhaps would the extraordinary meeting in Salzburg be decisive? The prime minister of the United Kingdom, Theresa May, appeared to hope so. The summit was the first gathering of EU leaders since she had presented the by-then-infamous 'Chequers plan'.[17] This carefully crafted, fine-tuned text, agreed on by the British cabinet in the Prime Minister's official country residence, Chequers, was supposed to offer a path to navigate the rocky terrain of EU–UK relations post-Brexit. Theresa May's plan was for the UK to follow EU rules on goods (including food and farm produce) to keep UK–EU trade flowing smoothly and avoid a hard border in Ireland, while still being able to set its own trade deals with other countries. One of May's most memorable statements from

[15] Douglass, M. (1990). Foreword: No free gifts. In M. Mauss (Ed.), *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in Archaic societies*. p. xii. Routledge.

[16] www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/09/18/theresa-mays-showdown-salzburg-pitch-eu-clear-give-chequers/, accessed 29 October 2025.

[17] www.Politico.eu/article/european-commission-chequers-theresa-may-brexit-plan-would-save-uk-business-billions/, accessed 29 October 2025.

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this time was the blunt phrase: 'Brexit means Brexit'.[18] The Chequers plan was supposed to be May's triumph as a Conservative leader: a chance to prove she could 'deliver' it.

In the months leading up to the summit, May and her ministers had set off on a diplomatic tour of Europe's capitals,[19] with a mission to persuade the EU leaders to distance themselves from what London saw as the Commission's overly rigid stance. When Commission officials expressed concern that the UK would undermine the single market for goods by keeping its benefits without following all its rules, the British government had urged them to rally around May's 'creative' vision for the future. 'Time is on my side', Theresa May had asserted. But under the Treaty of the European Union's Article 50, the clock was already ticking, giving the UK and the EU only two years to negotiate a withdrawal agreement. If no agreement was reached within that time, and no extension agreed, then UK would automatically leave the EU. This would result in a 'hard Brexit', entailing the immediate cessation of all existing agreements, including – most importantly – Britain's access to the single market, and lead to a brutally sharp, unbuffered separation. Everyone knew a deal had to be struck in the coming autumn. May's optimism had received a boost over the weekend before the summit when Austria's chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, met with Germany's Angela Merkel.

In the wake of that meeting, Kurz had said that 'it is important to avoid a hard Brexit',[20] which London interpreted as a hint that the EU's rigid stance was softening. But despite the positive thinking swirling around Downing Street, the EU's fundamental position had not shifted significantly. The same evening, on 19 September at 8:35 p.m., Theresa May stepped into the spotlight, determined to win her

[18] https://apnews.com/general-news-0ce5961e56cf4b9991f0214c7528f4e9, accessed 29 October 2025.

[19] www.ft.com/content/5bd4ab3c-fc97-11e8-aebf-99e208d3e521, accessed 29 October 2025.

[20] https://Politico.eu/article/austrias-kurz-tells-theresa-may-to-avoid-hard-brexit/, accessed 29 October 2025.

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appeal to the European Council. Dressed in a dark jacket and one of her statement necklaces, she was allowed to speak for ten minutes at the end of the dinner at Salzburg's Felsenreitschule theatre. None of the other EU leaders could officially respond, as Brexit negotiations were in the hands of the European Commission. Still, May saw this as the moment when a workable Brexit deal might finally materialise: as she had written in an op-ed in the German newspaper *Die Welt* the previous day: 'To come to a successful conclusion, just as the UK has evolved its position, the EU will need to do the same.'[21]

The next day, on 20 September 2018, one of Tusk's social media team assistants took some snapshots of the leaders strolling around in the Mirabellgarten during a break from the proceedings. Peter selected the best images and uploaded them to the Instagram profile of Donald Tusk.[22] In one photo, Tusk is offering a tiered stand of cakes to Theresa May, who is pictured clasping her hands in front of her chest and smiling as if truly delighted. The photo was curated with the caption *A piece of cake, perhaps? Sorry, no cherries*. In the context of the ongoing Brexit negotiations, the press team hoped it would be a funny spin on the popular idioms of 'cherry-picking' and 'having one's cake and eating it too'. Theresa May is laughing in the picture: the tweet was intended as a good-natured joke.[23]

But what the press team did not know was that Theresa May has diabetes. The image went viral and immediately provoked diplomatic reactions. Some diplomats emphasised Tusk's 'daring' and 'brave' social media interventions, while others called the image a 'famous social media fail' and a diplomatic faux pas.[24] In London, Tusk was deemed to have intentionally insulted the British prime minister: thanks to his cake tweet, the Saltzburg meeting, which had

[21] www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/19/salzburg-speech-after-dinner-theresa-may-brexit, accessed 29 October 2025.
[22] www.instagram.com/p/Bn8Luwbjzf9/, accessed 27 May 2021, accessed 22 October 2025.
[23] Fieldnotes, 26 March 2019.
[24] https://listverse.com/2013/11/25/the-10-worst-diplomatic-faux-pas-by-famous-politicians/, accessed 23 October 2025.

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been hyped in London as May's possible breakthrough moment, instead embodied her humiliation.[25] The following day, May delivered a television address demanding that Britain be treated with 'respect' while the British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, warned that 'insulting her on social media [. . .] is not the way we are going to get a solution to this difficult situation'.[26]

Erving Goffman's concept of 'loss of face' comes vividly to life in this episode. In Goffman's terms, face is 'the positive social value'[27] we try to project: a fragile construct that can easily crumble when our performance is misinterpreted or undermined. What was supposed to be a merry Brexit joke quickly spiralled out of control, and despite its intended humour, the cake update was interpreted as underscoring the UK's vulnerability while perhaps also making light of May's medical condition. As the image spread, it further eroded her carefully cultivated image as a composed, powerful leader engaged in an important negotiation. Within the Brussels Bubble, Tusk came under fire, with critics questioning his diplomatic judgement, and calling the post a disaster. In Goffman's terms, the performance of 'face' – normally carefully preserved in social interactions – collapsed spectacularly when the post collided with high-stakes politics to serve as a vivid warning of how fragile online face-work can be.

Looking back on the 'piece of cake' incident, Peter compares it to the time before social media, when it took him and his team half an hour to prepare a quick press release and call in a few cameras. While today, as he explains with a laugh, 'a tweet is so easy to do, while talking to cameras is so much more demanding'. Peter says, 'it requires a lot more self-discipline when you are in front of that Twitter machine, no, or in front of your Twitter profile'. This is why the social media team always discusses Tusk's tweets in advance, says

[25] www.independent.co.uk/voices/theresa-may-salzburg-eu-summit-brexit-chequers-humiliation-row-political-crisis-a8547551.html, accessed 29 October 2025.
[26] www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45611738, accessed 29 October 2025.
[27] Goffman (1955). On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction. *Psychiatry*, *18*(3), 213.

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Peter. If someone says 'It's simply too crazy, it's too controversial, or at least let's wait. Then time showed that OK, it was probably a good idea we didn't do that, or … [...] because it is such a powerful tool then you have to be … you have to be careful.'[28]

MULTIPLE DIGITAL SELVES

Like Peter, Emma has also had the experience of a social media update going viral. Emma works as a civil servant in the Council of Ministers and helps manage its external communications, including social media. When we first met her in the winter of 2019, she is covering the ECOFIN Council and its decisions – a job involving handling many different digital presences, each tailored to a specific target audience.[29] 'There is a general EUCO account, a EUCO press account, and my personal account', she explains. 'On the general account, we publish procedural things, often in visual form. It's really the "most plain messages" here: simple videos, one on what meeting takes place, and a second on why the meeting matters.' This is what Peter refers to as the 'boring' content. The press account, by contrast, serves a more specialised audience. 'This is where we share links to press releases and the public documents we're working on. The press account is also worked on during the meeting, while the posts for the official one are prepared further in advance and are generally similar across meetings, councils, and working groups.'.[30]

Then there is Emma's personal account, which she describes as 'targeted at my own clientele … I am followed primarily by people who are interested in Euro-stuff, the ECOFIN, and economic issues,' she elaborates. 'This account is really for me to say "I am here" – it's for flagging up stuff and to try to attract attention within the Brussels Bubble. I also use it to flag myself up as a contact point, so that people know they can ask me about certain topics.'[31] Emma's experience highlights a common challenge in the Brussels Bubble: professionals must constantly juggle multiple social media accounts, each serving a distinct purpose

[28] Fieldnotes, 12 November 2019. [29] Fieldnotes, 12 December 2019. [30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

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and audience. Emma's three accounts – the general EUCO, the press-focused EUCO and her personal profile – illustrate not only the practical demands of her role but also the broader expectation to 'offer oneself up' to the professional community, often without immediate reward.

This practice of maintaining multiple digital presences reveals an ambiguous 'performance of the self'. With so much of professional and political life having migrated online, there is a socio-technical obligation to "share" simply in order to participate, with the result that each post or update can blur the line between institutional representation and personal identity. And when you post, which of your faces are you really representing? Is this comment the EU's or is it Emma's?

She recounts a recent example: 'Yesterday, I was tweeting something about the COREPER. I was tweeting the agenda that had also been made public, so that people knew what I was working on, and that they could reach out to me with questions. So, I have about 1,000 followers, which means that I'm no big social media figure in Brussels' (for comparison, in 2025, Donald Tusk has around 2.1 million followers), 'but this is also not what I want to be, or what any of my colleagues want to be. We're generally not speaking on the record on this platform. That means we don't want to be quoted, and we don't want to be breaking the news. But of course, when you're on this platform, you can't control it.'[32]

Which brings us to the moment when one of Emma's tweets reached far beyond her intended audience of other Brussels insiders following the agenda of a COREPER meeting. When we ask her if she has ever tweeted something that she regretted, she tells the following story:

'It actually happened to me once – a few months ago, we had a discussion about something related to the bio-oil industry in Indonesia, so a very niche topic', she recalls.

> And I'd tweeted something about that, and I became a superstar in the bio-diesel world in East Asia. I got so many messages. And

[32] Ibid.

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> apparently, I was the only one: the only source that could be found on the EU position on this topic. So all of a sudden, I was being quoted as '*[Emma] from the EU Council Press Office said this and that on bio-diesel in Indonesia*.' And then I got really concerned actually and thought whether I had done something really terrible by posting that . . . but nothing happened, and at some point the discussion moved on.

Emma was fortunate that her tweet did not lead to lasting repercussions. She was not identified as having an EU position for too long, but the incident underscores the unpredictable nature of performing (as) the EU on social media.

I NEVER, EVER REPLY

While the occasional tweet may go viral beyond the usual circles, most social media activity in the Brussels Bubble operates as an insider conversation. Even what counts as 'viral' here is often confined to those who closely follow EU politics. If you scroll through the feeds of EU institutions, officials and journalists, a clear pattern emerges: they are mostly talking to each other, and they are mostly communicating in their own language. Across social media platforms, Euro-lingo dominates – just remember Jack, who curated his update with the hashtag #EUCO.

To get a sense of how this insider logic works at scale, we monitored the online Brexit debate for a six-month period on Twitter by collecting every status update mentioning the term 'Brexit' from 1 March to 31 August 2019 and analysing the resulting 75 million Brexit-related tweets.[33] We identified 69 million retweets, 55 million mentions and 6 million quotes. In the global Twitter debate about Brexit, members of the Brussels Bubble – the leaders and staff of the EU institutions, the permanent representatives of member states,

[33] Un-published working paper by Wangen, P., Eggeling, K., & Adler-Nissen, R. Bursting the Brussels Bubble via Twitter? A Social Network Analysis of Brexit Tweets by EU Politicians, Officials, and Journalists.

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members of European Parliament (MEPs) and Brussels-oriented journalists – remained a relatively small group, constituting only a little over 10 per cent of the broader conversation on Brexit. This indicates that there is a large global conversation about EU politics, but it is predominantly a discussion among insiders. This imbalance becomes evident when comparing the flood of attempts to engage with EU officials, leaders and officials on social media and the limited responses from within the Bubble. With only 1,035 identified accounts, it's unrealistic to expect its members to respond to millions of mentions over a six-month period. As Jack explains: 'I get addressed sometimes [on Twitter] . . . people tweet at me but I never, never reply.'[34]

Jack's remarks raise an intriguing question: who, among the many people and organisations competing for their attention, does the Brussels Bubble choose to acknowledge? And who gets left out of the conversation?

In the period we observed during 2019, roughly 7.8 million interactions were directed at the Bubble, with 4.2 million retweets, 3.3 million mentions and 300,000 quotes targeting its members. The Council and Commission accounts are the most insular, directing 70 per cent and 57 per cent of their social media updates and posts at others within the Bubble on Twitter. National diplomats, MEPs and journalists are somewhat more outward-looking, but even among these groups, a significant share – 39 per cent for member state representatives, 38 per cent for the media and 25 per cent for MEPs – is still focused 'inward'. It is a community that thrives on retweets, mentions and quotes, reinforcing the relationships already forged in the offline meeting rooms and corridors of Brussels.

Retweets are the clearest signal of this internal dynamic. Unlike mentions and quotes, which can invite criticism or additional commentary, retweets tend to amplify support or agreement. The numbers confirm it: retweets are even more Bubble-focused than other types of interactions, making the act of retweeting the digital

[34] Fieldnotes, 28 March 2019.

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equivalent of giving a colleague a pat on the back: a public endorsement of shared views or mutual achievements.

But what, exactly, are these insiders and outsiders talking about? A deeper dive into the updates offers clues. If we look at the words members of the Brussels Bubble use in their tweets, there is an over-representation of words and hashtags that are typically associated with the camp of people who would rather the UK remain in the EU: '*fbpe*' (follow back pro Europe), '*remain*', '*#gtto*' (get the Torries out), '*#stay*,' '*#revokeremainrebuild*', '*#votelibdem*', '*#stopbrexit*'. Among users that the Brussels Bubble do *not* interact with, we find accounts using words like '*maga*', '*trump*', '*patriot*', '*conservative*' in their account descriptions, and the systematic use of more explicit phrasing including words like '*fucking*', '*fuck*', '*utter*', '*irony*', '*shut*', '*sucks*', '*shame*' and '*farce*'.

What makes these words more than just curiosities is how they are patterned, how these patterns intersect with the wider debates about how social media reshaped the Brexit conversation and how the political actors themselves perceive that shift. The leader of the UK Independence Party and prominent Eurosceptic Nigel Farage put it bluntly in the European Parliament during a questioning of Meta's CEO Mark Zuckerberg, arguing that without Facebook and other social media '[. . .] there's no way that Brexit or Trump or the Italian election could have ever possibly happened. It was social media that allowed people to get around the back of mainstream media.'[35] This reflection from a leading 'Leave' figure highlights how social platforms not only amplified partisan narratives but also, according to Farage, challenged the traditional gatekeepers of information – in a shift that fundamentally altered how Brexit was debated and understood.

The emotional toll of engaging in this debate online as a high-profile EU leader was perhaps most clearly captured by the then European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker. In a revealing

[35] www.buzzfeednews.com/article/markdistefano/nigel-farage-thanked-zuckerberg-for-brexit, accessed 29 October 2025.

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interview with *Politico* in 2019, Juncker expressed his frustration with the alliance between US president Donald Trump and Nigel Farage and admitted to deliberately avoiding Trump on social media as a result. As Juncker explained: 'Although he is a specialist of tweets, I'm never reading these tweets because I'm not following the social networks, because I don't like to see day after day that I am drunk, that I am corrupt, that I am a nobody. My collaborators ... are giving me the interesting pieces.'[36] Juncker's deliberate disengagement reflects a choice to shield himself from online aggressions and toxicity – reflecting the social media dynamics of the Brussels Bubble.

One member of the Brussels Bubble who was notably more responsive to reactions during the Brexit negotiations was Sabine Weyand. A senior Commission official, and then the EU's deputy Brexit negotiator, Weyand worked hand-in-hand with Michel Barnier and is often recognised as one of the masterminds of the Brexit file. During the negotiations, Weyand's tweets condensed complex political and legal issues into clear, succinct points, making her posts valuable for insiders and curious spectators alike. She dismissed British ideas of having its cake and eating it too, and replied to Brexit suggestions from the UK media or government with remarks like *and there goes another myth* ...

One of the most intractable issues during the negotiations was how to avoid a hard border in Ireland, given that the UK had decided it would be leaving both the single market and the customs union. As part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement, the 'Irish backstop' was proposed as an insurance policy against the return of a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. It would have kept Northern Ireland aligned with some EU single market rules and the UK in a customs arrangement with the EU until a permanent solution was found. The arrangement, which was to last indefinitely unless both sides agreed to an alternative, was negotiated in 2017–2018 but never

[36] www.Politico.eu/article/juncker-commission-european-union-tusk/, accessed 24 October 2025.

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implemented because it risked trapping the UK in the arrangement for years, leaving it unable to strike its own trade deals on goods with the rest of the world.

On 3 February 2019, in response to debates on how technologies such as surveillance cameras could avoid an Irish backstop solution, Weyand tweeted: *fact-checking <<alternative arrangements>> re #Brexit backstop: Can technology solve the Irish border problem? Short answer: not in the next few years*.[37] The tweet contained a link to a BBC article and was accompanied by an image of a satellite circulating above Italy. As Weyand had explained a few days earlier, after a vote in the UK Parliament: 'We looked at every border on this Earth, every border the EU has with a third country – there's simply no way you can do away with checks and control.'[38]

Weyand often struck a tone of calm authority, counterbalancing the sensationalist discourse surrounding Brexit. Her tweets differed from Tusk's more agitated updates such as the infamous tweet he posted on 6 February 2019: *I've been wondering what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted #Brexit, without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely*.[39] While Tusk succeeded in expressing his frustration but failed to engage directly with concrete propositions, Weyand's approach was precise, sometimes witty and carefully calibrated to inform or to clarify the record on what Brexit really meant.

Taken together, these strategies – Juncker's avoidance, Tusk's assertive pronouncements and Weyand's targeted rebuttals – illustrate different modes of handling the unruly terrain of social media debate. Yet they all held a certain distance from the void which Nigel Farage and Donald Trump then weaponised. Taking full advantage of social media's potency, Trump cast Brexit as part of a transatlantic populist surge and publicly championed Farage as the next ambassador to the United States. He also featured Farage at campaign rallies, positioning

[37] https://x.com/WeyandSabine/status/1092102169422192640, accessed 24 January 2025.
[38] www.bbc.com/news/uk-47047993, accessed 1 March 2025.
[39] www.Politico.eu/article/__trashed-21, accessed 24 October 2025.

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him as a key ally in a broader revolt against 'establishment elites' in tweets custom-designed for social media amplification.

The divide between pro- and anti-EU voices does not just reflect long-term economic, cultural and political divides. We now know that algorithmic design, targeted data profiling and digital manipulation also contributed to the divide between the Remain and Leave camps during the Brexit era.[40] Cambridge Analytica, the disgraced British data analytics firm, conducted work for the Leave.EU campaign and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) ahead of the Brexit referendum, data-profiling voters at a more sophisticated level than ever before. The resulting data-driven campaigning helped polarise the debate, amplifying certain voices and marginalising others, which contributed to the siloed nature of the conversation we observed.

JOKES AND GOSSIP

Yet social media engagement in the Bubble is not solely a political and commercial battlefield: another more widespread and popular genre of engagement serves as a reminder that social media is also deeply integrated into the everyday life of the Bubble community. Sabine Weyand's most successful tweet, for instance, had nothing to do with Brexit, diplomacy, politics, or even the EU. On 26 March 2019, @WeyandSabine posted a short tweet: *Word of the week has to be 'Tweetzustimmungserwartungsenttäuschungsgefühl'*[41] *(Tweet-appreciation-expectation-disappointment-feeling)*. This tweet was a response to one of her followers who had asked her: *what's the long German compound word for being really chuffed with a tweet you've done but then it only gets a few pity likes?*[42] Weyand's clever response

[40] Brändle, V. K., Galpin, C., & Trenz, H. J. (2022). Brexit as 'Politics of Division': Social Media Campaigning after the Referendum. *Social Movement Studies*, *21*(1–2), 234–253; Bastos, M. (2024). *Brexit, Tweeted: Polarization and Social Media Manipulation*. Policy Press; Howard, P. N., & Kollanyi, B. (2016). Bots, #Strongerin, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum. arXiv preprint arXiv:1606.06356.

[41] https://x.com/WeyandSabine/status/1110461284917698560, accessed 24 October 2025.

[42] www.politico.eu/article/the-bad-cop-sabine-weynand/, accessed 24 October 2025.

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captures the emotional craving for social media approval. Later that day, Sabine Weyand wrote: *Having tweeted for 2 years on Brexit, trade, Europe, liberal democracy, this is the tweet for which I get most Likes!! I am now suffering from acute 'Tweetzustimmungserwartungs übertreffungsenttäuschungsgefühl!' (Tweet-appreciation-exceeding expectation-disappointment-feeling).*

Sabine Weyand's self-ironic German tweets tap into a distinct genre of tongue-in-cheek updates circulating across the Brussels Bubble that are neither recognition tweets, political statements or factual rebuttals. Yet when posted consistently by Commission officials, diplomats and EU journalists, even seemingly self-critical posts help their authors gain – and give – attention. In Brussels, like in all political and multilateral hubs and networks, visibility and information are everything. Social media becomes a space for gossip, weather observations, self-irony and sharp critiques of EU institutions. This lighter, more human side of online engagement forms its own genre, offering EU leaders and diplomats a refreshing counterbalance to the constant institutional jargon that defines their professional lives. These lighter posts are often the ones that resonate most widely and are retweeted the most – as the following story told to us by Jack confirms.

As we noted in Chapter 1, Jack is an avid Twitter user himself and has reflected on what the platform means for his work. One story he tells us is perhaps the most striking example: Jack is walking across Place Jourdan on a rainy day. As he turns the corner, he almost bumps into another pedestrian and is forced to look down at the pavement – and there, lo and behold, is a puddle in the exact shape of his native Ireland. He stops and is about to snap a photo on his phone when the reflection of the overhead streetlamp hits the water just where Dublin would be. Bingo! Jack uploads the photo onto the PERMREP Twitter account, and it goes viral. Indeed, it becomes the representation's most retweeted post. 'Ironically', he later reflects, 'it has nothing to do with diplomacy'.[43]

[43] Fieldnotes, 28 March 2019, see also Adler-Nissen, R., Eggeling, K. A., & Wangen, P. (2021). Machine Anthropology: A View from International Relations. *Big Data & Society*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211063690.

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Next to individual light-hearted updates, two satirical social media accounts have achieved legendary local status in this context: @Berlaymonster and DG MEME (@meme_ec). The latter was started by an anonymous Commission trainee in June 2018:[44] the account has since grown, and the face behind the account is now public; his name is Fabio Mauri. Both accounts regularly spread satirical posts about the EU and appear to be driven by a frustration with the Union's poor communication.[45] As Mauri explained in an interview to *Politico*, 'We cannot allow people like Marine Le Pen to dominate with their style of communication [. . .] Instead of always replying in a serious way, you have to also reply at an emotional level, make fun of them and show how ridiculous their points are.'[46]

DG MEME, which is effortlessly familiar with the language and the political workings of the EU, highlights inefficiencies, comments on controversies and spreads political commentary on Union business from accounts across social media and on its on '.eu' blog. While its follower base might not be vast in numbers, its audience includes key figures in EU decision-making, including commissioners, MEPs, directors and advisers. This gives the account significant influence. Journalists from *Politico*, Euractiv and *The Financial Times* often cite DG MEME, using its posts as inspiration for their stories, including the more serious ones. For example, DG MEME was referenced in a story about burnout and dissatisfaction among EU civil servants, amplifying concerns over working conditions within the European Commission.[47] Social media may lack the 'smoothness' of face-to-face encounters, but for members of the Brussels Bubble, it accords with the pattern of gift-giving, refusals, jokes and gossip identified by Mauss and Goffman as part of the sustainment of everyday human bonds.

[44] www.politico.eu/article/dg-meme-inside-the-european-commission-satire-department/, accessed 29 October 2025.
[45] www.tovima.com/politics/fabio-mauri-the-face-behind-dg-meme-and-satire/, accessed 29 October 2025.
[46] www.politico.eu/article/dg-meme-inside-the-european-commission-satire-department/, accessed 29 October 2025.
[47] Ibid.

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A DIGITAL VILLAGE

In 2007, media sociologist Peter Golding concluded that despite massive attempts to create a European public sphere, '[the] growth of transnational media (newspapers, magazines, television news) has functioned for and in the interests of a restricted elite space rather than to extend generalised access to communication by and amongst European publics'.[48] Today, we look back on a fundamental transformation of public spheres through a digitalisation of communication technologies on a massive scale, promising an unprecedented opportunity for exchange and citizen dialogue. Yet most members of the Bubble, often in an attempt to protect themselves from overload or aggression, avoid direct engagement with external criticism or anti-EU arguments. Rather than the 'global town square' once imagined, social media in Brussels functions as a digital village of its own, focused on its own symbolic recognition games. Many of our research participants expressed worry or concern about this dynamic, often pointing to a democratic deficit in Brussels. Pierre, the mid-level French diplomat introduced in Chapter 3, articulated this sentiment clearly to us over espressos at Schuman's Café Pulp. At his Permanent Representation (PERMREP), he explained, Twitter use is governed by strict rules and careful reflection: 'We always ask ourselves: What's the point?' and 'Who are we trying to reach?' In his experience, the followers of official EU accounts are overwhelmingly insiders within the Brussels Bubble rather than 'the average farmer somewhere in the countryside'. This observation, combined with Jack's insistence on 'never, never replying' to outsiders, underscores the existence of a 'Bubble effect' in the Brussels social media landscape.

This effect appears to be further exacerbated by the politics of the platforms themselves. The growing concerns around X's and Facebook's poor content moderation, lack of transparency and rampant misinformation have led to them being fined for breaching EU

[48] Golding, P. (2007). Eurocrats, Technocrats, and Democrats: Competing Ideologies in the European Information Society. *European Societies*, *9*(5), 726.

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rules, and towards the end of our research period, there were proposals for new wide-ranging regulatory agendas, including the Digital Services Act. The broad disenchantment has also fuelled a wave of withdrawals from Twitter. Since Elon Musk's takeover of the platform and the ensuing alliance between big US tech companies and the second presidency of Donald Trump, the Bubble has been experimenting with alternative platforms. EU leaders, diplomats and senior officials still post on X for the sake of continued visibility, but they are also opening accounts on Bluesky. This reflects a general yearning for a less toxic, more controlled digital space, even as the EU's presence on X persists, driven by the platform's continued status as a stage for mass amplification.

Whether on X or Bluesky, the day-to-day exchanges within the Bubble are rarely dramatic. Most posts, as Peter put it, are of 'boring handshakes'[49] in the form of professional updates, political fine-tuning, ritual gestures of acknowledgement and the occasional inside joke. But these small, everyday exchanges serve as more than a stage for face-work and quick-wittedness. They have also become 'cultural processes that work to produce the EU as a social fact' – at least for those who work in and around its institutions.[50] Likes, shares and comments are tokens of solidarity, while mentions and retweets function as scarce resources to be distributed with care. The gift of recognition is alive and well in the Bubble, thriving as vigorously on social media as it does in face-to-face formats.

[49] This pattern of social media updates to serving to reinforce professional ideals of international mediation diplomacy, is something we have also documented at a global scale, see Møller et al., The Social Aesthetics of Digital Diplomacy.

[50] McNamara, K. (2015). *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union*. Oxford University Press, p. 2.

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