

The #Brexit on the Facebook pages of the European institutions

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Abstract. The Brexit referendum was among the first major public events where online users had no "slacktivism" reactions and they led the entire debate and popular will from the inside of the online world to the real world. It is becoming increasingly clear that Social Media is becoming an increasingly powerful tool in political debates, and during the parliamentary, presidential, European parliamentary or even referendum elections, it becomes the channel that can decide the final outcome. However, the debate in the online environment can be altered by two important factors: (1) political bots - which can manipulate public opinion by posting in a large number of fake news and (2) "slacktivism" reactions from online users, who are content only to quickly distribute unverified information or to push impulse driven on the "like" button and to scroll further. This study focused on analyzing the frequency with which European institutions spoke about Brexit on their Facebook pages and on identifying and analyzing the messages that generate high engagement from users. Thus, we will analyze all the posts published by the three major European institutions - the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union - starting on the first day after the Brexit Referendum in the UK (24 June 2016) until 24 June 2019.

Keywords. Brexit, Facebook, European Commission, Council of the EU, European Parliament

1 Introduction

Beyond the many advantages, Social Media also has some disadvantages that keep the convenience it gives their users. Social Media still does not facilitate the creation of unitary public opinions or at least clearly defined groups of citizens' opinions, but rather a series of individual and heterogeneous opinions, which cannot be the result of broad debates on issues of public interest.

On the other hand, there are researches that demonstrates the "positive, but still modest" impact (Breuer & Bilal, 2012) of the Internet on civic engagement. In the last ten years, more researchers have shown that the impact of digital media would be negative, especially due to the increase in population from a conventional form of political participation and civic engagement to a new form that many authors, including we can recall Shah, Kwak, McLeod (2001), have labeled it "slacktivism" or "clicktivism". These new concepts represent the online activity that requires little effort from the user and produces minor impact in the real world.

The neologism of "slacktivism", which consists of the words "slacker" and "activism", is usually used in a pejorative sense to designate political or civic activity in the online environment. While some activities refer to traditional forms of participation (signing an online petition), others involve online socialization platforms, which include rapid and impulsive shares, pressing the "like" button or copying standardized statuses into social networks just to create content or just to raise awareness of a political issue. Klafka believes that slacktivism is "the act of signing petitions on the Internet, joining social media groups or supporting causes. Usually these acts are performed to help a person feel better or to feel that he is doing something, when in reality there is no personal effort for effective change" (Klafka, 2010).

In the opinion of Camelia Beciu, Social Media facilitates the promotion of different opinions, "but these are presented more as a collection of individual and disparate opinions, they are not the result of a dialogue and a positioning on issues of general interest" (Beciu, 2011). On the Internet, opinions are rather reactions to an event, users expressing themselves as individual actors and not as members of a community.

Jurgen Habermas calls the online participation in debates on certain topics as "too many individualized opinions, centered on cases, experiences, feelings, sufferings" (Habermas, 2009). Therefore, Habermas responds to a question asked by several researchers about the fact that the Internet favors deliberative communication ("developing through dialogue some points of view around issues affecting communities and society"; "developing a spirit of mutuality"; "reciprocity in finding acceptable ideas, solutions or arguments"). From the online participation of the users, it results rather polarized opinions (pro and cons opinions), than the opinions generated by the deliberative communication. According to Habermas, "as soon as opinions degenerate into opinions only, then there is nothing left to deliberate" (Habermas, 2009).

The Brexit referendum was among the first major public events where online users had no "slacktivism" reactions and they led the entire debate and popular will from the inside of the online world to the real world. Regarding the major impact that Social Media had on Brexit, Vyacheslav Polonski says that his large-scale social media data analysis shows "that not only did Brexit supporters have a more powerful and emotional message, but they were also more effective in the use of social media. We find that the campaign to leave had routinely outmuscled its rival, with more vocal and active supporters across almost all social media platforms. This has led to the activation of a greater number of Leave supporters at grassroots level and enabled them to fully dominate platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, influencing swathes of undecided voters who simply didn't know what to think" (Polonski, 2016).

Max Hanska and Stefan Bauchowitz found that from the data collected "it is clear from our analysis Twitter users who supported leaving the EU were more numerous, and Eurosceptic users in general were more active (they tweeted more frequently) than Remain users. We estimate Leave users were more numerous and more active on Twitter by a factor of 1.75-2.3. Other researchers examining Google search trends, Instagram posts and Facebook found similar patterns of Eurosceptic views being communicated with greater intensity by a greater number of users on those platforms" (Hanska & Bauchowitz, 2017).

Seen from another perspective, the debate on Social Media has been altered by so-called "political bots" (automated scripts that produce content and mimic real users). In the case of the Brexit debate, "political bots" had a major influence on a percentage of 30% of undecided voters a week before the referendum. "The pervasive use of bots over social media heightens the risk of massive cascades of misinformation at a time when voters will be

thinking about their options and canvassing their social networks for the feelings of friends and family. Bots have been used by political actors around the world. world to attack opponents, choke off hashtags, and promote political platforms. During this sample period, however, we found that social media bots were mostly used to amplify messages rather than argumentative engagement or even impression management", concludes Philip Howard and Bence Kollanyi (2016), in a study on computational propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum.

2 The #Brexit topic on the European institution's Facebook pages

2.1. Research objectives

O1: Analyzing the frequency with which European institutions spoke about Brexit on their Facebook pages.

O2: Identify and analyze messages that generate high engagement from users

2.2. Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, we will use both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, we will analyze all the posts published by the three major European institutions - the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union - starting on the first day after the Brexit Referendum in the UK (24 June 2016) until 24 June 2019. From the total of posts, we'll only extract and analyze posts that mention Brexit, according to a few indicators, such as: the rate of interaction, the position of the institution, and periods in time when institutions and public opinion have shown greater interest in the subject.

2.3. Centralization and data analysis

Frequency of Facebook posts on Brexit

During the monitored period, 24.06.2016 - 24.06.2019, the European Parliament referred to Brexit in 91 posts out of a total of 1788 posts (representing 5.09% of total posts), the European Commission - in 74 posts out of a total of 2071 posts (3.57%), and the Council of the European Union - in 55 posts out of a total of 2246 posts (2.45%). At the same time, when talking about Brexit, all three institutions use very often video postings (European Parliament - 60.81%, European Commission - 61.82%, and Council of the European Union - 80.22%). Photos are used in a smaller proportion: 31.08% - European Parliament, 36.36% - European Commission, 9.89% - Council of the European Union.

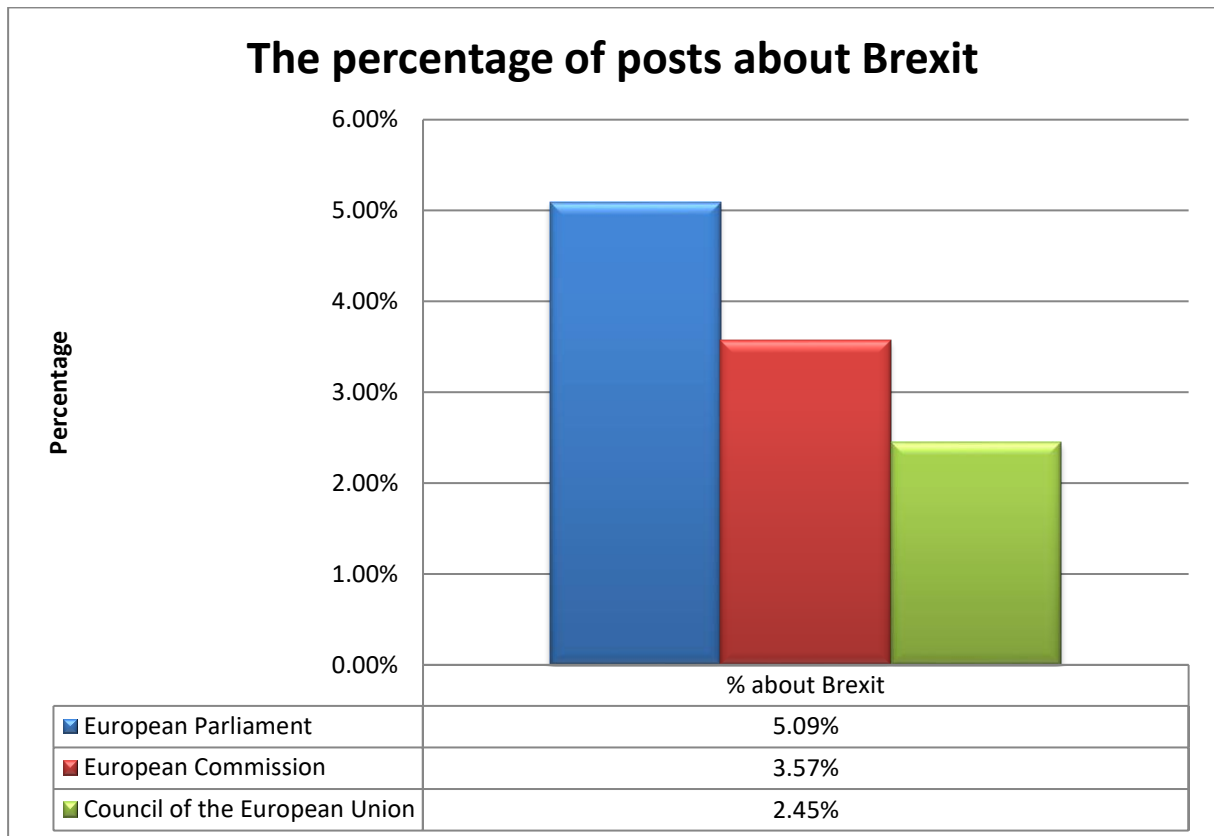


Figure 1 - The percentage of posts about Brexit

Evolution in time of postings about Brexit

According to the chart below, we can see that the first European institution that mentioned Brexit on the Facebook page right after the UK Referendum was the Council of the European Union, on June 29, 2016. On June 4, 2016, the European Parliament published its first time on Facebook about Brexit and European Commission posted for the first time about Brexit, on December 6, 2016. We can also see that Brexit's interest increased between March 2017 and April 2018 when most posts and most interactions were recorded. In the following period, the interest remained relatively high, and on March 29, 2019, the European Commission published the post about Brexit with its highest rate of interaction.

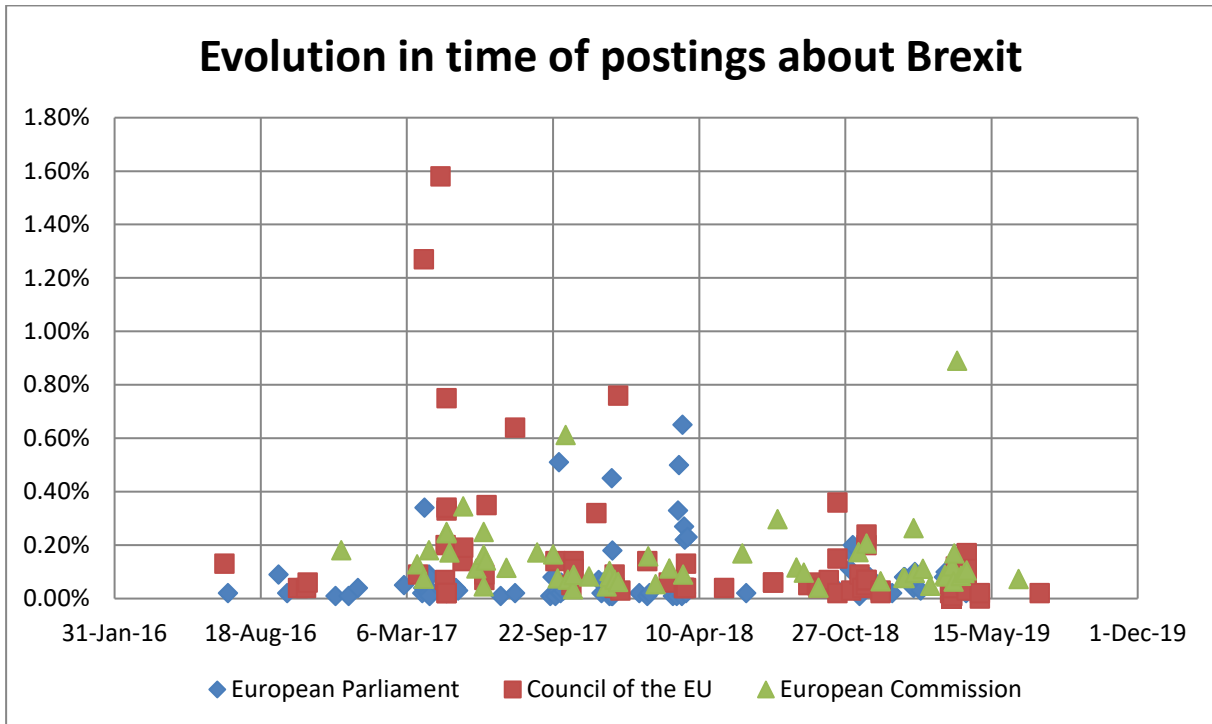


Figure 2 - Evolution in time of postings about Brexit

Online users' reactions on Brexit

Regarding the reactions of the online audience on Brexit, most interactions were generated on the European Parliament page - 149,318 interactions (on average 2017 interactions per post), and 67,03% of all reactions are like, 13,37% comments, 12.13% shares and 3.09% love. On the other hand, the European Commission's Facebook page generated 64841 reactions (1178 responses per post, on average), 55.13% of them being likes, 20.60% shares, 12.03% comments, 5,39% sorry and 3.85% love. The fewest interactions were generated on the European Union Council website - 37,429 reactions (411 responses per post, on average). Of the total responses, 62.06% are like, 21.06% shares, 8.51% comments, 3.23% love and 2.85% sorry.

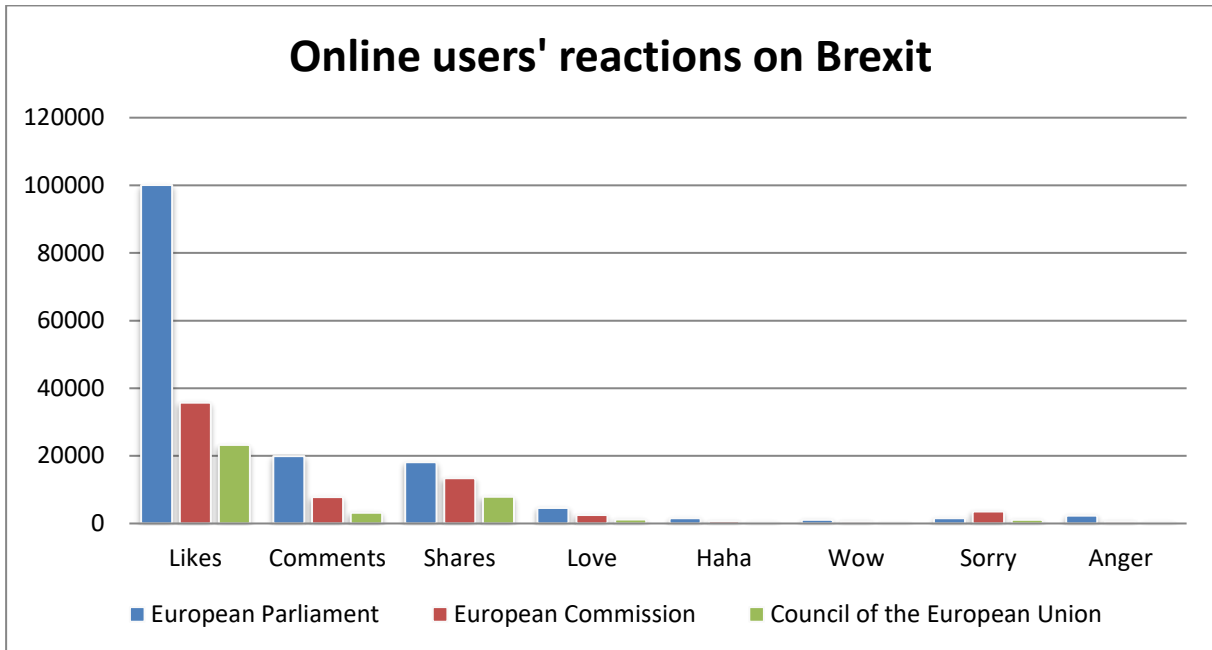


Figure 3 - Online users' reactions on Brexit

Posts on Brexit with the highest rate of interaction

A. Council of the European Union

On April 21, 2017, the Council of the European Union publishes a report on what the academics and think-tanks think about Brexit, which it will present at the summit for over a week. The report also talks about the EU-UK relationship, the impact on Brexit and the negotiation phases on the future of Europe. The post generated 3483 likes, 83 comments, 672 shares, 59 love, 44 haha, 20 wow, 9 sorry, 5 anger and an interaction rate of 1.58%.



Council of the European Union

April 21, 2017 · 🌐



What do academics and think-tanks say about #Brexit? Our research service has compiled main articles into a weekend read ahead of the summit next week. Find out about publications on the EU-UK relationship, the impact of Brexit, the negotiation phases and the future of Europe: europa.eu/!Pm97HU



Goga Aurelian Liviu and 3.5K others

133 Comments 670 Shares



Like



Comment



Share



Figure 4 - The post with the highest interaction rate about Brexit (The Council of the European Union)

On March 29, 2017, the Council of the European Union publishes a video announcing that: "Today the UK formally informed the European Union of its intention to leave. The other 27 EU countries are ready to start the #Brexit process and have long agreed who will do what in the future negotiations". The post generated 1488 likes, 159 comments, 1377 shares, 49 love, 11 haha, 22 wow, 343 sorry, 27 anger and an interaction rate of 1.27%.

On December 20, 2017, the Council of the European Union publishes a post in which it talks about some of the main issues the EU handled in 2017 (terrorism, shifts on the global stage, migration and Brexit) and how the Council helped Europe meet these challenges. The post generated 1868 likes, 165 comments, 408 shares, 93 love, 13 haha, 27 wow, 5 sorry, 6 angry and an interaction rate of 0.76%.

In a post on April 29, 2017, a video of the press conference held by European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is posted after the European Council summit on Brexit. The post generated 48,000 views, 1469 likes, 189 comments, 314 shares, 92 love, 11 haha, 11 wow, 6 sorry, 21 angry and an interaction rate of 0.75%.

On August 1, 2017, the Council of the European Union sends a press release, which it also posts on the Facebook page, announcing that "23 EU cities are applying to host the two EU agencies currently based in the UK . There are 19 offers for the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and 8 applications for the European Banking Authority (EBA)". In addition, the

Council announces that the two agencies will need to be relocated in the context of Brexit. The post generated 1225 likes, 130 comments, 491 shares, 45 love, 7 haha, 14 wow, 65 sorry, 6 angry and an interaction rate of 0.64%.

B. European Commission

On March 29, 2019, the European Commission announced, with regret, the House of Commons negative vote on Brexit. More than that, a "no-deal" scenario on April 12 is now a likely scenario. "The EU has been preparing for this since December 2017 and is now fully prepared for a" no-deal "scenario at midnight on April 12. The EU will remain united. The benefits of the Withdrawal Agreement, including a transition period, will no circumstances are replicated in a "no-deal" scenario. Sectoral mini-deals are not an option, "says the European Commission. The posting generated 4005 likes, 441 comments, 1892 shares, 167 love, 60 haha, 325 wow, 1083 sorry, 60 angry and an interaction rate of 0.89%.



Figure 5 - The post with the highest interaction rate about Brexit (European Commission)

On October 9, 2017, the European Commission announces that Brexit negotiations from that week should continue to advance. The post contains a video with the speech of the chief negotiator Michel Barnier in the European Parliament. The post generated 190.000 views, 2614 likes, 216 comments, 1552 shares, 173 love, 13 haha, 8 wow, 63 sorry, 9 angry and an interaction rate of 0.61%.

A post from 22nd of Mai, 2019, recalls that the European Commission received the mandate to begin the Article 50 negotiations with the UK on behalf of the EU27. "We are ready. Formal negotiations will begin as soon as the UK is ready. We want full transparency during the whole negotiating process so our negotiating documents will be released to the public and will be published on our dedicated site." The posting generated 1245 likes, 91

comments, 774 shares, 57 love, 7 haha, 9 wow, 263 sorry, 3 angry and an interaction rate of 0.34%.

On January 28, 2019, the European Commission publishes an announcement that the European Medicines Agency will officially move to Amsterdam because of the Brexit. "#Brexit - It's always hard to say goodbye. After 24 years in London, the European Medicines Agency staff symbolically said goodbye to their UK offices by lowering the 28 EU flags. Next March, due to Brexit, the organization responsible for the scientific evaluation, supervision and safety monitoring of medicines in the EU, will officially move to Amsterdam ". The post generated 973 likes, 119 comments, 471 shares, 29 love, 53 haha, 29 wow, 653 sorry, 14 angry and an interaction rate of 0.26%.

On April 29, 2017, the European Commission announces that the leaders of the 27 Member States (including the UK) have adopted the guidelines for Brexit negotiations and urge fans to join. "The Union will maintain its unity and act as one with the aim of reaching a result that is fair and equitable for all Member States and in the interest of its citizens. It will be constructive and strive to find an agreement. This is in the best interest from both sides. The Union will work hard to achieve that outcome, but it will prepare itself to be able to handle the situation too if the negotiations were to fail". The post generated 1288 likes, 60 comments, 259 shares, 63 love, 5 haha, 4 wow, 35 sorry, 2 angry and an interaction rate of 0.24%.

C. European Parliament

On March 18, 2018, the European Parliament invites fans to the debate, inviting them to ask questions about Brexit, to Guy Verhofstadt, Parliament's lead member on Brexit. The posting generated 13705 likes, 494 comments, 682 shares, 202 love, 241 haha, 72 wow, 41 sorry, 104 angry and an interaction rate of 0.65%.



Figure 6 - The post with the highest interaction rate about Brexit (European Parliament)

On September 30, 2017, the European Parliament publishes a sad video on how the citizens of Northern Ireland will be affected as a result of the UK leaving the European Union. "Following last year's Brexit vote, the 500km border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will soon become an external EU border. Parliament insists that there can be no hard border between both parts of the island." The video generated 1,851,676 views, 7,868 likes, 589 comment, 2,198 shares, 261 love, 61 haha, 376 wow, 201 sorry, 51 angry and an interaction rate of 0.51%.

The posting from March 13, 2018 is a live video in which MEPs debate the position of the European Parliament on the future EU - UK relationship following Brexit. The video generated 1.3 million views, 8491 likes, 1,262 comments, 1,210 shares, 305 love, 73 haha, 70 wow, 54 sorry, 307 angry and an interaction rate of 0.50%.

On December 11, 2017, the European Parliament announces the votes on its position on the negotiations thus far while EU leaders also meet to review the latest developments. Also, at the same post, the page manager invites fans to ask questions, in the form of comments, to Guy Verhofstadt, Parliament's lead member on Brexit. Posting generated 8,777

likes, 439 comments, 632 shares, 136 love, 42 haha, 61 wow, 44 sorry, 249 angry and an interaction rate of 0.45%.

On March 30, 2017, the European Parliament's Facebook page broadcast live the Brexit Coordinator Guy Verhofstadt's speech explaining Parliament's position on the negotiations regarding the UK leaving the EU. The video generated 1.2 million views, 3,970 likes, 1,694 comments, 1,106 shares, 512 love, 42 haha, 26 wow, 117 sorry, 40 angry and an interaction rate of 0.34%.

3 Conclusions

It is becoming increasingly clear that Social Media is becoming an increasingly powerful tool in political debates, and during the parliamentary, presidential, European parliamentary or even referendum elections, it becomes the channel that can decide the final outcome. However, the debate in the online environment can be altered by two important factors: (1) political bots - which can manipulate public opinion by posting in a large number of fake news and (2) "slacktivism" reactions from online users, who are content only to quickly distribute unverified information or to push impulse driven on the "like" button and to scroll further.

During the period monitored, June 24, 2016 - June 24, 2019, the European Parliament published more information (5.09%) on Brexit than the other two major European institutions - European Commission (3.57%) and Council of the European Union (2.45%), and the debates increased especially during March 2017 - April 2018, when the topic generated increased interest from online users.

At the same time, it is found that the European Parliament has managed to generate stronger emotional reactions than the other two institutions, predominantly being "like" and "love". At the same time, during the monitored period, we could observe that the European Parliament invited to debate (13.37% of reactions being comments) and to dissemination of published information (12.13% of reactions were shares). It is noteworthy that "sorry" or "anger" reactions are very few, which indicates that users are not disappointed by the UK's decision to leave the European Union. If the Council of the European Union and the European Commission have most often used posters with static images or videos with infographics, the communication strategy of the European Parliament has focused a lot on the debates, publishing many Facebook lives inviting them. users to debate the issue of Brexit.

In Social Media, keywords are interaction and debate, and if an institution uses the same classic unidirectional communication strategies, it risks losing not only the followers, but also generating reactions of dislike from the public. Institutions that have managed to share their public image in one person (people feel like talking to a person, not a bureaucratic institution), have managed to earn trust capital in Social Media and generate strong adhesion reactions. to any type of content that the institution propagates in the virtual public space.

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