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Lobbying on the German Federal Level: The Unknown Shift Through Digital Transformation

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LOBBYING ON THE GERMAN FEDERAL LEVEL: THE UNKNOWN SHIFT THROUGH DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of technological change, increasing information flow, and a rising number of communication channels, new opportunities and challenges are arising for communication between interest groups and federal policymakers in Germany. To keep up with further technological developments and the increasingly fast-paced political communication system, it is crucial to analyze lobbying in the context of digital transformation in greater detail.

Lobbying as a traditionally non-public part of political communication has been a challenging setting for research. Understanding the general contours of this activity is an important public need - especially for digital lobbying, where a lack of academic research exists. This paper therefore provides an in-depth analysis with emphasis on both communicating sides - lobbyists and federal parliamentarians of the German Bundestag as well as their employees.

This analysis is based on a qualitative, explorative stance drawing from 15 semi-constructed interviews and an enriching ethnographic approach. The first authors' exclusive experience from working inside a lobby agency and also inside the German Bundestag helped this study to contribute to lobbying research with the focus to better understand how the effect of digital transformation in lobbying is perceived in Germany.

Keywords: (Digital) Lobbying ▪ digital transformation ▪ German Bundestag ▪ empirical research

1. INTRODUCTION: GERMANY IN BETWEEN DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES

Digital transformation has arrived in all sectors of today's life, affecting the core of society (Conroy & Vaughn, 2018; Wallner, 2017). In particular, the internet and social media -understood as "digital networked communication tools" - have put a mark on society (Lindgren, 2017, p. 4). This development has resulted in increasing information flow and a rising number of communication channels that bring new challenges and opportunities for communication between lobbyists and federal policymakers in Germany (Baxter, 2017; Katzenbach, 2018; Sargut & McGrath, 2011). Even opportunities ultimately build challenges through the consequent change to the usual political communication system (Couldry, 2012). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to analyze lobbying in times of digital transformation, especially as the influencing of policymakers is an accepted institutionalized activity (Busch-Janser, 2004).

The present article aims to give insights into the perception of the shift caused by digital transformation in lobbying on the German federal level since emerging actors are starting to enter the field. A look at German politics in 2019 shows that there is certainly influence from digitally organized movements (Jungherr et al., 2019). In this article, we thus look at how transmitter and receiver perceive digital lobbying, challenging first-hand observations with their own assessments. More specifically, by analysing 15 semi-constructed interviews with lobbyists, federal parliamentarians of the German Bundestag and their employees, the article which is enriched by an ethnographic approach, attempts to answer the question of "how the effects of digital transformation in lobbying are perceived by federal policymakers and lobbyists in Germany."

The project is centred on the Bundestag, the most important organ of legislative power on the German federal level. The Bundestag passes laws that fall within the competence of the federal level. In Germany, Members of Parliament, parliamentary groups (fractions), the government and the Bundesrat can introduce bills or revise passed ones (Bundestag). This project focused only on Members of Parliament and their employees as they symbolize the largest group to lobby with 709 parliamentarians (each bureau has about 3-5 employees).

The paper is divided into four main parts. The following section is an overview of the relevant literature, including definitions. In the second part, we introduce the methodology and data samples. The third part looks into limitations, and ethical aspects and the final part focuses on the empirical results, which include data analysis and a discussion. Here, we summarize findings from the interview phase between October and December of 2019 and draw upon the first author's experience from working in the parliament.

2. DEFINITIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital transformation stands for the use of new, fast, and frequently changing digital technology that affects society as a whole (Gimpel & Röglinger, 2015). The rapid

change within a system is largely triggered by the emergence of new technological infrastructures (networks, computer hardware) and applications (apps on smartphones, web applications, social media). Coping with digital and social evolution is often considered as the most important issue for institutions. Dealing with “the ever-growing information flow, the need to address ever more audiences as well as building and maintaining trust is expected to be important issues” and will likely become even more important for the future (Zerfass et al., 2017, p. 53). “Digital society”, “information society”, “postindustrial society” and “network society” are only some examples of the many names for this phase (Lindgren, 2017, p. 4). Regardless of the name, it is important to recognize that the use of digital media in “any society, group, or individual will simultaneously have elements of digitally analogue, digitally enhanced, as well as digitally transformative outcomes” (Ibid., p. 295). All in all, the digital transformation brings tools, channels, platforms and strategies which are used to obtain, produce and share knowledge and is thereby extremely important for communication and interaction with the political field (Ibid.).

This section also addresses the terminology and interpretation of lobbying itself as well as the latest combinations “digital lobbying” and “electronic lobbying”. Some scholars say, that “the word lobbying has seldom been used the same way twice by those studying the topic” (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 33) showing the need for more clarification especially regarding new combinations of the term. Scholars and practitioners in Germany define lobbying as a more private, non-mediatized representation of interests achieving political goals (Kleinfeld et al., 2007; Krebber et al., 2016; Weiler & Brändli, 2015), and also as a media-mediated communication process with the same goal except including the public (Filzmaier & Fähnrich, 2014; Krebber et al., 2015). In either way: the lobbyists can be seen as transmitters and policymakers can be viewed as receivers. Considering the fact that communication is a two-way road, these two may also switch roles, even though the above mentioned direction is considered most common (Michalowicz, 2004; Milbrath, 1960). Alongside the difference in publicity another acknowledgement between the English and German use of the word “lobbying” has to be made. In German, lobbying is a somewhat negatively connotated term which is often used as a synonym to Public Affairs to up value it (Einspänner, 2010; Filzmaier & Fähnrich, 2014). Whereas in English speaking countries, lobbying is a part of Public Affairs surrounded by a regulated political system; hence, it is less negative (Shapovalova, 2015; Thimm & Einspänner, 2012).

Some researchers predicted that reaching the political field in the future is only going to be successful with an increase of public channels e.g. social media (Bender, 2010). Einspänner (2010) describes the internet as a “substantial instrument” for lobbying (Einspänner, 2010, p. 34). Achieving one’s political goals through digital communication and social media use is described as more than a new lobbying style. “Digital Public Affairs” or “lobbying in the virtual world” (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, p. 52) enriches and revolutionizes the field of classic lobbying (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012, p. 185). The objective of convincing policymakers on individual

interests or a policymaking-process continues to be the same (Krebber et al., 2015). Although now, the difference is to illuminate the practice more (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012) alternating the active involvement of various participants in “a stronger public presence” (Einspänner, 2010, p. 20). Addressing the German context and considering these aspects “digital public affairs”, “social-media lobbying” and “interest representation 2.0” are considered as synonyms for “digital lobbying” in this paper.

The German term *Politik* stands for the overall action to create and enforce binding rules (Patzelt, 2001) and is translated as “politics” for this study. In its broadest sense, politics stands for the human action to create and preserve general rules to live under (Heywood, 2000). The distance that politics has kept between creating rules and the public is now being reinterpreted. Leading scholars in Germany state that through the digital transformation, anyone who has been carefully kept at a certain distance from policymakers (or vice versa), is now able to get very close (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2017). Institutions and organizations suddenly get the opportunity to create or maintain a direct relationship with policymakers (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2017). The change in internet use and digital communication is well discussed in literature (Dohle et al., 2014; Henn et al., 2015). Scholars who have analyzed these developments see a chance to close the “digital gap” between businesses, lobbyists and politics (Argenti & Barnes, 2009, p. 219). They see the increasing usage of digital communication by lobbyists and policymakers as a chance for more transparency, openness, authenticity and collectivity (Einspänner, 2010; Fleisher, 2012). It is by contrast also argued that the core of an organization, relationship or movement does not automatically change by “going digital”. Zerfaß and Pleil (2017) also doubt that direct digital communication is more efficient and claim that new technologies are no guarantee for constructive communication relationships. Thus, more empirical research is needed to study these developments in greater detail.

The publication *Digital Public Affairs* (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012) symbolizes the start for digital lobbying in German literature. The authors see the internet and digital communication as a “special [...] form of political PR” through “the mediation and representation of interests of companies, institutions, associations and organizations” (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012, p. 185). Leading scholars recognize digital communication activities to coordinate internal and external actions with policymakers as an opportunity for change (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). Through this new quality of communication, it is argued that dialogues, personalization and also general communication are on the one hand easier to handle than ever before (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). On the other hand, it also demands new strategies that have to be analysed further.

Hillebrand (2017) understands the use of digital communication as more than just complementary to the “old world”, he argues that such involvement enables a new method of exerting power (Hillebrand, 2017, p. 67). Involving the public creates a more democratic framework of lobbying as the disclosure of the public’s will increases the weight of digital lobbying (Hillebrand, 2017). This weight can also be understood as a “shift, in terms of increased speed, impact, reach, and efficiency”

(Lindgren, 2017, p. 294). Here we argue that especially efficiency and impact depend on the perspective. Therefore, the receiver's view must be included in a conclusion.

Expanding one's reach on social media platforms is considered to create public pressure. Thus, a stronger public presence on the transmitter side is also expected (Einspänner, 2010). Social media platforms enable the transmitter to present and the receiver to discuss political opinions and concerns publicly. Circulating information between users through the mobilization via, e.g. online-petitions is only one example (Krebber et al., 2016). Without many filters and universally accessible, social media presents its unique selling point (Köppl, 2017). More precisely, monological- and dialogical communication, passing on simple information as well as persuasive communication, can be done for example via Twitter and Facebook (Krebber et al., 2015). On the website of lobby control (a German club for more transparency) digital lobbying is declared "to convey an innovative and transparent image and [to] make lobbying more dialogue-oriented" (Müller, 2019). However, it is still unclear how effective these strategies are and what role transparency plays to policymakers in Germany.

To summarize: There is no doubt that lobbying literature identified a specific transformation of the field as the communication infrastructure changes (Diederich, 2015; Harris & Fleisher, 2005; Joos, 2016). Hence, scholars and practitioners studying lobbying agree that digital lobbying becomes more important for research (Krebber et al., 2016; Thimm & Einspänner, 2012). Thimm and Einspänner (2012, p. 185) even argue that it is a "young discipline that enriches and revolutionizes the areas of classic political PR". The overall academic research perspective seeks to improve the understanding and evaluation of these developments in the political context (Fischer & Miller, 2017). Especially since digital instruments not only present new opportunities to mobilize the public, but are also seen as a risk because public communication can be "reinterpreted" by anyone (Hofmann, 2010, p. 301) or appear "one-sided" (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1258). These arguments of the "fundamental and far-reaching [...] change" (Henn & Frieß, 2016, p. 11) will be discussed further in the paper and elaborated upon in the context of Germany.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The strategy of inquiry of this research has an exploratory focus as it tries to discover categories and not verify an existing theory. Using an inductive methodological approach to identify patterns and connections in the data we aim to develop explanations for the research context. Based on this qualitative, explorative stance, we make use of data collected during semi-structured interviews (n=15). We analysed the data through memo-writing and coding rounds, both of which were used as a process that could lead to the emergence of conceptual categories (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 1; Institute, 2008).

The non-public aspect of lobbying has previously created challenges for the

researchers in generating reliable data. Considering that practical work experience helps to provide a better understanding of the overall research ground (Danelzik, 2018; Nothhaft, 2017), the first author of this study decided to use her unique access and experience to contribute to the research field. Thus, her experience of working inside the German Bundestag as an employee for a parliamentarian will be used complementary to the interview material. Most ethnographic notes we will rely upon in this paper were collected through shadowing i.e. following someone (at work) like a shadow (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007). The first author of the paper “shadowed” a member of parliament during several lobby meetings and for the complete spectrum of his time table during one session week a month in 2019. The first author’s unique experience as insider-researcher therefore contributes to understanding transmitter and receiver perspectives not only from a theoretical angle but also in the context of practical everyday business. Thereby, the given context is one of the most important aspects in a work based investigation that “inevitably makes a difference to [this] research” (Costley et al., 2010, p. 1). Shadowing limits the research material to manageable proportions as it allows the first author of the paper as a practitioner – and the researcher in this case – to select material (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 58). In short, it is up to the researcher to decide what they find relevant for their research (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007, p. 10). Reflections about the time the first author of the paper was working in a lobbying agency (2016–2017) as a consultant responsible for preparing lobbying meetings with politicians, has allowed her to observe the “other side” quite extensively. The ethnographic observations were used to challenge the interview guide and later the coding process to gain a deeper understanding of the overall research ground. Nevertheless, as our aim was to explore interviewees’ perspectives of the topic, the main analytical focus of the article is still based on the interviews.

The selection of interviewees reflected our intention to talk to both the transmitter and the receiver of lobbying communication, i.e. we aimed to interview lobbyists as well as parliamentarians and their employees. Due to the ongoing climate debate in Germany, we decided to focus on two committees that have become a more significant target for lobbyists: The Committee on Transport and Digital Infrastructure and the Committee on Food and Agriculture of the German Bundestag. As only full members of the committee have a voting right, the first author of the paper requested an interview with these MPs and the members of their staff and was able to schedule interviews with politicians of every fraction in parliament.

We also aimed to interview different institutions to represent the lobbyists side, e.g. a representative from a lobbying agency, a member of a law firm, a lobbyist for an association in Berlin, etc., as well as capture different age and experience levels of the lobbyists. The first author of the paper then sent an invitation to participate in the study to lobbyists whom she had met before via email and the ones accepting the request were included in the sample.

All in all, fifteen interviews were conducted (see Table 1). Seven interviews were

done with members of the parliament, five with the employees working in the parliament and three with lobbyists. Eleven face-to-face interviews in the respective offices of the parliamentarians as well as four phone interviews were conducted (Loosen, 2014). Each interview lasted from 30-60 minutes.

Table 1. Overview of the interview sample

| Nr. | Male | Female | Age | Political Side | | | Non-Political Side | Work Years | Form |
|-----|------|--------|------|---------------------------|-------|-------------|------------------------------------|------------|--------|
| | | | | Member of Parliament (MP) | | MP Employee | Agency/ Law firm/ Association/ NGO | | |
| | | | | Govt | Oppos | | | | |
| 1 | x | | 40+ | x | | | | 10+ | Direct |
| 2 | x | | 40+ | x | | | | 5- | Phone |
| 3 | | x | 50+ | | x | | | 20+ | Direct |
| 4 | x | | 40+ | | x | | | 5- | Direct |
| 5 | | x | 50++ | | x | | | 10+ | Direct |
| 6 | x | | 40+ | | x | | | 5- | Direct |
| 7 | x | | 30+ | | | x | | 5- | Phone |
| 8 | x | | 20+ | | | x | | 5- | Direct |
| 9 | x | | 30+ | | | x | | 5- | Direct |
| 10 | x | | 20+ | | | x | | 5- | Direct |
| 11 | | x | 30+ | | | x | | 5- | Direct |
| 12 | x | | 30+ | | | | x | 5+ | Phone |
| 13 | x | | 40+ | | | | x | 10+ | Direct |
| 14 | x | | 40+ | | | | x | 20+ | Direct |
| 15 | x | | 40+ | | x | | | 10+ | Phone |

The interviews covered the main topics: definitions, digital communication, transparency and lobbying success. As the interviews were semi-constructed (Loosen, 2014), they contained further dialogues depending on the interviewee. Some of the sample questions are visible below:

- Has politics changed through the digital transformation, and if yes, how?
- Has lobbying changed through the digital transformation, and if yes, how?
- Do you use social media and if yes, which channel for which content?
- What does “transparent lobbying” mean to you, and where do you see opportunities and risks through the digital transformation for it?
- How can the success of lobbying or digital lobbying be measured?

The interviews were first transcribed - five to eleven pages each - and then analysed manually. While transcribing, we pre-coded the data by in vivo coding (Char-maz, 1996). In addition to coding the discourse with short phrases, the pre-coding phase included highlighting, boldening, underlining rich or significant quotes

(Saldana, 2015). These “codable moments worthy of attention” (Saldana, 2009, p. 16) were the first indicator for the detailed coding process. The broad coding phase was important for further steps as it gave an initial indication of the overall status of the topic. The second coding round was thematic, where each question was compared to the respective others (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Among the various indices proposed in the literature, we employed manual coding, which is considered a valid measure in qualitative research (Saldana, 2009). Table 2 demonstrates the main codes and sub-codes that resulted from the coding procedure.

Table 2: Overview of sub-codes for main codes

| Code | Sub-Code |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Sentiment | Positive impression |
| | Critical impression |
| | Negative impression |
| Knowledge on digital lobbying | Has an understanding |
| | Has no understanding |
| Transparency | More transparent |
| | Less transparent |
| Lobbying Success | Successful |
| | Unsuccessful |

4. LIMITATIONS AND ETHICS

This study seeks to create reliable data in accordance to transparency and sincerity principles (Tracy, 2010). Consequently, limitations of the study and its ethical aspects have to be discussed. This is especially important in the context of “insider-researcher” perspective as part of the research took place “within the researcher’s own work practice” (Costley et al., 2010, p. 1), i.e. the first author of the paper played a dual role in this study. Considering that research context always affects the researcher, it needs to be acknowledged that the culture and structure of the first author’s individual work situation as well as that of her colleagues, have shaped her overall experience (Costley et al., 2010). Still, the work in parliament enabled her to speak to many different people inside the system and provided a look behind the scenes both of which allowed us to add several reflexive layers to the analysis.

We decided not to include the first author’s former colleagues to the sample as we did not want her to be biased with any question or jeopardize the results due to a personal relationship. At the same time, we used her former contacts to recruit lobbyists for an interview. The political interviews were requested without any indication or knowledge of her position in parliament. Only during the interviews, this information was shared as a sort of “ice breaker” for a trustworthy conversation.

Due to the busy schedules of the parliamentarians we had to combine face-to-face interviews with phone interviews, which could be considered as one of the limitations of the study. In comparison to the face-to-face interviews the phone interviews were shorter as the lack of visual indicators might have grounded a deeper conversation (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Nevertheless, we believe the chosen methodology enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. A basis of trust gave the interviews and all conversations a competitive edge in sincerity which incorporates authenticity and genuineness (Tracy, 2010). The reciprocal relationship between understanding a phenomenon and coding became evident while working with the transcripts in several rounds (Weston et al., 2001). Finally, new aspects evolved and helped to transform our understanding which also helps to prove the value of the chosen approach.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS: LOBBYING IN THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

5.1. Interviewees perceptions about lobbying as a practice

The interviews confirm an entire sentiment-spectrum on lobbying. When actively asked for a lobbying definition, many participants included *legitimate* (Interview 9, Interview 14) as a defence of the business. Such a wording confirms the awareness of the rather negatively-connotated field. Interest representation was also differentiated as not critical and lobbying as negative even though it actually had the same meaning as the following quote shows:

Well, I separate lobbying from interest representation. Representation of interests is: when I explicitly say what would be important for me from my point of view and put it into an overall context. Lobbying is: I try to get someone to represent my interests with hidden or open means. And that is why lobbying is problematic for me, representation of interests is not - I need it. I need to know what other people affected by the laws think about it. That's why I think representation of interests is perfectly fine, it just has to be transparent and lobbying is often an attempt to manipulate someone, so to speak, so only to provide them with information that are positive in their own interest. (Interview 5)

This view is shared by another politician using the term "PR" saying:

I often don't see it as lobbying at all, but more as PR. (Interview 15)

Although most of the interviewees defined lobbying as positive at first, their

perceptions changed to be more critical later on. In fact, some used negative attributes or clichés to talk about the practice:

Yes, I think the term itself is always directed to these backroom conversations, where people in the non-public make sure that the influence that not everyone should know about happens. (Interview 10)

Some politicians in our sample even associated the practice with far worse scenarios.

But then to accept the fact that so to speak completely concealed networks are emerging which can also blackmail us as politicians, plus large slaughter groups, three large food trading companies which determine, let's say, what goes on here in the state, and politicians can only say: "Yes, please, please". That is a catastrophe. And that, of course, has something to do with lobbying, because their interests suddenly play a completely different role. Because they are the economic players, and they are sitting at control points where you no longer have any alternative. (Interview 5)

As well as:

Yes, you can recognize it by the voting behavior. Because there are drafts of motions or changes in the law that would make more sense otherwise, but then you notice that there is more money behind the way it is actually done. (Interview 6)

Based on the first author's ethnographic research, we noticed a positive working attitude of politicians towards lobbyists if their request fell inside their political perspective. The first author of the paper also noticed a remarkable difference in the actual amount of lobbying requests between the members of the opposition and governing parties. Her insider knowledge suggests that politicians from the opposition are naturally less likely to be lobbied, hence they also have less working experience with lobbying. The same applies to politicians working in committees which attract fewer public interest. The first author of the paper has also noticed that politicians without frequent contact to lobbyists have relied more upon clichés compared to than the ones working with lobbyists regularly.

Another finding from the ethnographic notes is confirmed: negative sentiments towards lobbyists due to their intermediary function. When someone is personally concerned in the matter and addresses a politician directly, they are perceived more positively – in contrast to an intermediary who represents a third party who is sometimes not even present. The first author of the paper has actually seen lobbyists use this situation by bringing clients along to their political appointments. One lobbyist explained his strategy in the interviews and mentioned this aspect:

We talk to all stakeholders. We try to form alliances - and then we approach politicians, talk to them, in the ideal case this helps already. We always have the client with us during the appointments. So, we don't do it without the client. (Interview 12)

This phenomenon was confirmed by a politician saying that he did not have any problem when one would, e.g. tell him his or her request directly:

I am with the foresters, and they chose me to come here and represent their opinion and my own (...) and we have a problem. Can you help us? (Interview 6)

The above indicates that when one openly communicates their position, background and goals, it is more positively viewed by the politicians. However, overall, opposition politicians were still more likely to be critical towards lobbying per se. The interviewed lobbyists were aware of their work being negatively connotated and tried to defend their job by including the adjective "legitimate" or "neutral" when defining it:

Lobbying is the legitimate representation of interests of individuals and organizations towards political decision-makers in the ministerial and parliamentary spheres. (Interview 14)

Relatively boring and neutral, simply that one tries to enforce political interests. So, there is a representation of interests, and that is a representation of interests towards politics. And that's in relation to politics because you need politics to make something happen. (...) Yes, so I would say, seen that way, completely neutral, it is a political representation of interests. (Interview 13)

5.2. Knowledge and awareness on digital lobbying

Even when interviewees were hesitant to define digital lobbying, their understanding of the concept emerged from the discussion. Most participants were, however, not able to structure and categorize their experience in concrete examples like the following quotes indicates:

Yes, I don't know. Humm... I think the line between information and lobbying is more difficult to draw because you usually receive digital information or invitations to meetings. I don't know if it is really tangible in this form. So of course, one can do lobbying in the digital area, that is, via the digital medium. Usually, it is more the establishment of contact, and then I think it

becomes a lobbying discussion in the concrete event because I think it's too impersonal to do direct lobbying via digital media. (Interview 10)

The perspective is shared by:

The whole thing via Email. (...) More enquiries come in digitally. (Interview 11)

The lobbyists were also quite diverse in their answers. The oldest, with most experience, referred to digital lobbying as:

(...) simply adding social media as a channel, no more and no less. (Interview 14)

The two younger lobbyists had a very clear understanding of the potential the data could provide in addressing politicians. However, as confessed by one of the interviewees such things did not happen yet in Germany, only in the USA. Their definitions were:

Good question. (...) I thought like: oh crazy! AI, Big Data and Co. now regarding lobbyists, that's interesting. And then I realized that it's actually different these days because somehow, they say: Do you use Twitter and Facebook for lobbying work? And I thought to myself, hmmm...Digital Humhum is not Facebook and Twitter. It just means to work differently. To be able to work better or simply more efficient or whatever. It just surprised me that it was about communication. Now lobbying is also about communication, but at the beginning, I thought about digital lobbying. In Digital Public Affairs, we use data analysis and stuff like that. (Interview 13)

And also:

Yes, difficult, there are completely different approaches. (...) Well, I'll say everything with a publicity effect on the internet to spread your political messages to politicians. I could also do that with certain paid content; I can work towards certain target groups. For example, politicians at some level, seeing my messages more than any other people or other messages. That would be one possibility. It's also very much about the public sphere. (Interview 12)

A change in the field is recognized by the lobbying side where digital opportunities are identified as practical activities like using social media as a lobbying tool, creating emotions online and using the public digitally to reach stakeholders. The political side also mentioned social media in context to their work for direct or widespread

communication which shows that there is a general awareness of its importance. Surprisingly, no political participant mentioned anything about data or being targeted more than others. Even when one employee checked his boss's Facebook during the interview and found proof that the politician was actually involved in digital targeting strategies, he still denied that it was happening to the politician:

I have now taken a look at the Facebook page. What I just noticed on Facebook, the "ProBahn" (pro-German railway association) here from the region, regularly links us to their Facebook and then expects us to react to it. But that's normal Facebook work; I wouldn't describe that as lobbying. (Interview 8)

The above quote reveals the surface understanding of digital communication possibilities as mobilization and emotionalization. Even though the employee understands the crucial difference between classic and digital lobbying and what it can do to politics in terms of policymaking, he could not see how to be affected by it. Another politician also denies such developments to be happening in Germany by explaining:

Well, but that's really... we don't have anything to do with such big lobbyists in Germany. There we are, the German Bundestag, with our ass too far down. (...) It will go to Brussels or to America... (Interview 6)

More often the political side mentioned negative consequences concerning personal temporal aspects when talking about digital communication channels:

Processes have become much faster, an enormous acceleration of communication. Sometimes too fast. There is too little room to weigh things up, too much pressure to react immediately to everyone involved. It may not have changed for the better. (Interview 3)

During her ethnographic fieldwork the first author of the paper noticed that, in particular, politicians who were already using social media before entering the German Bundestag made more active use of digital channels so as to demonstrate their work in parliament. They were responsible for their own social media posts and they were mostly not discouraged by the velocity. Parliamentarians whose social media posts were constructed by their employees made more comments about the temporal pressure of this new working field.

In short, it seems as if there is a discrepancy between superficial meanings and profound knowledge of the core activities of digital lobbying, dominantly on the political side. Table 3 summarises how the political side perceives the theoretical and the practical realization of lobbying and digital lobbying. The first line demonstrates

the initial but surface perception and the second line demonstrates how the examples came out to be perceived later in the interviews:

Table 3 Sentiment overview of the political side (Source: Author)

| | Example lobbying | Example digital lobbying |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Surface | Theoretical legitimization of lobbying as a democratic tool: positive | Theoretical knowledge of Digital Lobbying: positive |
| Underlying / Core | Practical realization of lobbying as a democratic tool: negative | Practical knowledge of Digital Lobbying: negative |

5.3. Role of Transparency: tool or attitude?

The statements in this category were clear: digital transformation is seen as a chance to make lobbying more transparent. The majority of the interviewees believe lobbying becomes more transparent through digital transformation. However, during the interviews, several concerns were mentioned and helped to reveal another underlying attitude. The following data extracts demonstrate the diversity of the opinions regarding transparency through digital transformation:

...anonymization, which also takes place through the digital transformation...
(Interview 5)

Well, I would say it is even more difficult because it is even more covert and often gives the impression that it comes from “social media” and has a “social” context. You have to be very careful here because the sources are often not clearly recognizable. (Interview 5)

...The digital transformation is rather a risk. In my opinion, this is to hide things because in the digital world it’s possible. Sometimes I explain it by the adoption of different profiles, a variety of profiles. I don’t want to say fake profiles but that I have to do research first to analyze whether they are real and or not... (Interview 1)

There was also a more overarching explanation from the lobbying side, such as:

I just noticed that ten years ago everyone still thought “Great, the internet and even social media democratizes everything. Access to information and knowledge. Everyone can talk to everyone, and we all get a lot more information, and then we can all form a better opinion.” (...) And at the moment

you actually get the feeling that people think “No, that doesn’t lead to a better, informed discourse it actually poisons the discourse”. (Interview 13)

Looking closer into the answers and comments reveals phenomena like anonymization and fake profiles contradicting transparency. These comments countered our first impression that many interviewees had the simple assumption that just because something is posted online means that it is transparent as well. Nevertheless, only one parliamentarian actively questioned whether the digital transformation was really a chance for more transparency finalizing his thoughts with:

In my opinion, the digital transformation is, therefore, more risk of concealing (transparency). (Interview 1)

However, politicians, employees and lobbyists agreed that it was not enough to simply publish, e.g. names of participants, meeting dates, legislation texts, etc. as it was “too much information” (Interview 13). To them, transparency should rather be an “educational aspect” (Interview 13) and a “higher culture of political co-determination” (Interview 10) with more profound information, especially on how the legislative process works. One employee and a lobbyist agreed that so far “it is not directly [the lobbyists’] responsibility...” (Interview 10) and asked: “...is that rather an obligation of lobbyists or politicians?” (Interview 13).

The first author’s ethnographic fieldnotes also reveal instances of the “political opportune thinking” i.e. of situations where politicians make information public when it suits their positive image. Thus, during the fieldwork she experienced transparency rather as a tool than as an attitude. Many politicians hire a social media manager in the team to support them with their social media appearance. These communication channels should suggest the public as if they “shadowed” a politician – the difference is: the parliamentarian decides what is being published and filters the images in an exclusive perfect way.

5.4. Perceptions of lobbying success

The discussion about lobbying success is strongly questioned in terms of power as it suggests to influence the legislative process. Overall, lobbying success was described as being “difficult to measure” (Interviews 8, 11, 12, 13, 15). Only one lobbyist from our sample believed their work to be measurable by saying:

Lobbying activities focus on very concrete changes in legislation. They are either achieved or not achieved. Period. That’s a given point. (Interview 14)

The answer was given by an owner of an agency arguing that one needs to justify the work to one’s clients. The other two lobbyists attached less importance to success by

explaining that it is possible to succeed even if a lobbyist sometimes delivers poor work. And also, even if one delivers the best work and dedicates a lot of energy to a piece of legislation for a large period of time it might not be successful due to other indefinite factors:

In the end, you never know what exactly a legislative change is based on. It is never understandable that it is based exactly on the arguments of interest representative XY. That’s what makes it so difficult. (...) So, one thing that is very well measurable, is the activity. But as a lobbyist, I can really do anything within the possible scope...Do the perfect job and still simply have no impact on the process – and this might be due to completely different reasons. (Interview 12)

And also:

Then it may be a success, but it may not be my success causally. Nothing might have happened not because of me, but just because nothing happened. Imagine I am a lobbyist in the waste industry and nothing happens in the field for a year... no new regulation or anything... yes, was I successful? I think that is difficult to measure. (Interview 13)

On the political side the attention was driven towards personal trust and the “good old” way as Table 5 demonstrates:

Table 5: Code “lobbying success” examples

| Example Quote | MP | Employee |
|--|----|----------|
| Yes, uh, digital transformation is important, please don’t misunderstand, but I believe in politics it is important, very important, to have personal conversations, the personal appearance , in front of voters, in front of colleagues, also in front of colleagues from other fractions. Conversations are very important, and a personal conversation can never be replaced by a digital medium. (Interview 6) | x | |
| Because the problem is, with lobbying it is important that there is personal contact and this is virtually not possible . Because the most important currency in politics is trust. (Interview 4) | x | |
| You can exchange ten emails with a politician, but this will never replace one lunch . (Interview 9) | | x |

Based on the first author’s ethnographic field work, we argue that for the political side, lobbying success was often dependent upon personal conversations in contrast to digital aspects. We noticed that politicians interpreted personal meetings as an appreciation towards them. The conclusion of a personal conversation was mostly a concrete

to-do-list for the employees who also attended the meetings. These tasks were then quickly accomplished which was not necessarily done when digital requests came in. These kinds of requests were often postponed and sometimes not even taken seriously. The non-digital way seems to be more successful than new digital strategies.

At the same time, the presented quotes indicate that all of interviewees see and feel a change happening in lobbying due to digital transformations.

Politics has absolutely changed through the digital transformation because society has changed through the digital transformation and politics mirrors society. (Interview 1)

6. DISCUSSION

The continuous developments suggest the increasing importance of lobbying as Zerfass et. al (2017) suggested. Increasing publication possibilities and resulting information flow, and more active involvement of public actors as Thimm and Einspänner (2012) explain were also highlighted by interviewees.

At the same time, a concrete meaning of digital lobbying as a practice and its potential impact were still difficult to define for most of the interviewees in the study. Thus, exerting power, as Hillebrand (2017) argues, still has to be discussed further. In the interviews for this study politicians and their employees mostly connected success and power with classic lobbying means and not with digital ones. The lobbyists, however, mentioned digital communication strategies in the targeting methods they described.

The argument of a greater democratic framework of lobbying through public involvement (Hillebrand, 2017) cannot be backed as comments only scratching the surface of society and democracy at this point. To examine the chance of a democratic framework appropriately transparency has to be discussed involving the public.

The more transparent, dialogue-oriented image of digital lobbying as described by Müller (2019) was recognized by the participants in this study in relation to the changes in digital communication, rather than in the context of digital lobbying. Einspänner's (2010) argument that social media platforms are considered to lead to a stronger public presence on the transmitter side was also confirmed by the interviewees, just not in the context of digital lobbying. Even though knowledge of these practices exists by nature, they were not connected. Here, contrary to the first two aspects where communication with the political field as a whole is seen as something in transformation, lobbying that is inevitably influenced by its original form, is mostly not actively perceived in a digital context.

Digital transformation has an impact on lobbying. The following table summarizes sentiments towards the major aspects of the paper. By comparing the first positive statements - on the surface - and later rather negative comments - underlying/core - on the political side, a massive change was identified as Table 6 summarises:

Table 6: Surface and underlying sentiments of interviewees on interview aspects

| Sentiments | Lobbying | Digital Lobbying | Influence of lobbying | Influence of digital lobbying |
|-------------------|----------|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Surface | positive | positive | positive | negative |
| Underlying / Core | negative | negative | negative | positive |

The table reveals the level of bewilderment in the core understanding of digital lobbying and how the statements of the interviewees changed during the interviews. First, the practice of lobbying, digital lobbying and the influence of lobbying are confirmed and mostly seen as positive. When the interviews progressed the participants however, either neglected the practical realization of it or when still confirming it, it was through negative comments. However, the influence of digital lobbying was not confirmed in the beginning but later on actually described.

These massive differences demonstrate that the digital transformation started to shift how lobbying and its influence is perceived. It symbolizes first indications of a power shift towards digital lobbying. Therefore, we argue that classic lobbying has to empower itself to use digital tools and strategies to keep up in terms of their perceived influence.

As these first findings do not contribute to a full understanding of the field, we suggest increasing the interdisciplinary dialogue in lobbying research as an important area for future research. Focusing on digital lobbying in, e.g. data science will produce more insights. It is also important to further investigate these first findings through quantitative data analysis. Regarding limitations, more studies in Germany are needed. Studies about new actors that make use of digital means are also important to compare their approaches to classical lobbying.

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