

**Statement by Fred de Graaf, President of the Senate of the Netherlands,
at the 15th Meeting of the Association of European Senates, Session
"Senates and the use of social media", London June 14, 2013**

Social media: for better or worse

As of this year, nearly one in four people worldwide are social network users. Over 360 million Europeans are on social media. In my country, 8 out of 10 people use it on a daily basis.

There is no denying the widespread popularity, power and influence of social media. Not only on a private or commercial level, but also on a political level. We have seen what it can achieve in the Middle East. Social media can bring people together. It can bridge the gap between politics and society. Communication on a local as well as a global level is easier than it has ever been before.

But there is danger in social media as well. And I am not just talking about car accidents as a result of posting a tweet, or employees losing their job over a picture they put on Facebook. There is political danger as well. To me, that danger lies mostly in something that is currently occurring in several houses of parliament: the debate behind the debate. And with that I mean the debate that is held on Twitter before, after - and shockingly also during - a plenary debate in parliament. There are known examples of MP's that are actively discussing on Twitter something that has just been said by a member that has the floor. Before that member even has a chance to return to its seat, the discussion has already started.

To my opinion, this undermines the political debate completely. In addition, it makes the job of chairing such a debate even harder. Posts on social media, as short and perhaps private as they may seem, require carefully tailored content. Of course, social media can support greater transparency. And they create an opportunity for senators to make their ideas and beliefs known to the public in a way that is much faster, more personal and direct than the traditional media. That in itself is an amiable goal. But the potential for a discussion to move rapidly and beyond your control is something that has to be taken into account. Also, the rules of etiquette and protocol do not apply. In parliament we have created these rules in order to maintain a fair and respectful debate. When two debates are being held simultaneously, those rules are undermined.

This does not mean that Senates or senators should not take part in social media. As I said, it is a unique way to bridge the gap between politics and society. Social media can be used for making parliamentary information more accessible to the public and for transmitting society's signals to the parliamentary system. As long as it is used in a cautious, conscious manner that does not obstruct the parliamentary debate, social media form a great asset to modern communication.

In conclusion: you are probably wondering how active I am on social media myself. I'm not. To be honest I have no desire to participate in that form of communication. Perhaps forgivable by products of age and upbringing. I am not one of the 8 out of 10 people in the Netherlands. But luckily the institute of the Dutch Senate is active. And in the end, that is what it is essential. As a matter of fact a message on this important conference with photos taken here, has, an hour ago, already been published on our website and a reference to this message has been posted on our Senate's twitter account.

Thank you very much for your attention.