

Travel Research Grant Report

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Research on issues situated far from one's location used to be a demanding task that required considerable planning and funds, making travel grants almost necessary for someone who, for example, studied the European Union (EU) from Canada. As a born and raised Greek doing my Master's in Carleton I may be seen as an example of how this is not the case anymore. Video chatting, web resources, and everything else that has become part of my everyday routine when researching the media strategies of the European Parliament (EP) could create the illusion that everything I just claimed is fully true. Unfortunately, however, my story proves that relying on technology to replace actual field research may not be the way to go.

For the thesis of my MA in Political Science I am researching the ways in which the elected body of the EU, the European Parliament, is communicating with and reaching out to its citizens across member states. The aim of this study is to provide some new insights to the debate of the 'democratic' and 'communication' deficits of the European Union, which are concepts cited when criticizing the body and when Euroscepticism and phenomena like Brexit are discussed. To pursue that goal, I chose to interview officials of the information offices of the EP in the Republic of Ireland and in Greece, as well as local journalists, to determine how these two groups of actors interact with each other and how they contribute in informing the citizens of the two countries about EP activities. Further, these two member states were selected for the research because of the contrasts between them in their popular attitudes towards the EU, even though both Greece and Ireland went through similar issues both domestically and in their relationship with the EU during the financial crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s.

Going into the planning of the interviews I thought that it would be simple enough to identify journalists and EP officials in the two countries and start communicating with them even from a few thousand miles away. Nevertheless, at least in my experiences, phone numbers that reach something more than an answering machine are harder and harder to find on the internet, and emails tend to be an endless queue of unread messages in everybody's inbox that can take weeks to bring about any response, especially for highly-pursued journalists. This is where the Travel Grant from the Centre for European Studies in Carleton University comes in.

Through this program all my flight expenses to travel to Athens and Dublin from Ottawa, as well as part of my accommodation costs were covered allowing me to visit both European Parliament information offices and to meet with journalists in both European capitals in person. Beyond the incredible methodological value that face to face interviewing can provide within qualitative research, simply being present in each city and being able to collect physical material, and even just walking around the city centres provided me with a unique personal and academic experience which may have affected my approach to the research in even more ways than I can now understand.

Yet, even without these benefits of field research, which were only achieved due to the grant, my research would have probably not been at all possible without me physically being there. Buried in emails and phone calls, I tried reaching Irish journalists for weeks without any luck. This meant that I ended up in Dublin with only one interview scheduled with an EP official. It was there that things began looking better. By actually talking to the employees at the EP office I was able to get some contact information for journalists and, most importantly, I was able to attend an exclusive seminar by the European Parliament for journalists where the interviews were booked in minutes and without any hesitation from participants.

It is then that I realised: maybe my weeks of frustrating phone calls and refreshing my inbox pointlessly were not caused by the unwillingness of my participants to help researchers, but by the same technology that is often seen as endlessly opening up the borders of research and allowing a computer and Wi-Fi connection to replace travel, meetings, and human interaction. Don't get me wrong, without the internet it would probably have been even harder to even contact the people that I did manage to reach leaving me at the airport with nowhere to go and no one to talk to. Yet, let's not for a second think that actually being there amongst the people and the places you are studying and in front of those you are interviewing can be replaced by anything else, and that travel and research grants like the one provided by the CES are not some of the best and most valuable opportunities a researcher can ever get.