

Harnessing the power of the Internet for better communication

Open letter from the European Commission's community of internet editors and webmastersⁱ to President Barroso and incoming Commissioners

January 2010

Dear President,
Dear Commissioners,

The internet has revolutionised the way people communicate and share information. This has a major impact on the way the Commission communicates with the people it serves.

The audience for on-line news continues to grow; informal forums and blogs are increasingly influential on public opinion. Meanwhile the written press is in free fall, and companies are bypassing traditional media channels to communicate directly with their customers. This changed media landscape requires an open, decentralized way of communication, engaging in constant dialogue, rather than communicating via press releases. It demands also the establishment of a communication culture based on principles of fairness, honesty, transparency, and trust.

The EU was one of the first international organisations on the web in the mid 1990s. Now, the EU's website is one of the largest in the world with over 6 million web pages. Since 2007 the site has undergone a major overhaul to become more user-centric, in order to provide the citizen and our partners easier and faster access to the information they need.

The full support of the new Commission is needed to step up this process and help EUROPA better serve the European public – by consolidating, cutting and improving the information we present. We need websites that deliver clear, accurate and up-to-date information. Our websites cannot be mere document repositories. But above all, the new Commission should create an in-house communication culture that encourages and empowers staff across the organisation to use the internet and new media to interact with citizens

Serving citizens through websites focused on their needs

Major efforts are underway to overhaul the top levels of EUROPA – the interinstitutional level and the Commission level – to become user centric. However, a large number of the policy sites are still very much producer-led, reflecting departments' own agenda, structures and vocabulary.

We should

- focus web communication throughout all sites on the **needs and interests of users**, rather than the Commission's own priorities, organisational structures and vocabulary
- **strip Europa sites and pages of obscure jargon and less relevant content** – excessive historical background, inappropriate legal detail and promotional material – so that crucial information can be quickly found
- **research user needs** through regular feedback and web analytics; organise widespread usability and accessibility testing to improve the user experience and allow us to assess our sites and measure progress
- **require DGs to peer-review each other's websites** (existing and new) according to user-focussed criteria and **to share projects from inception in order to avoid repetitions and overlap**
- **provide updated information by either archiving, updating or closing outdated sub-sites.** Restructure, or merge sites with overlapping or contradictory content (this will require routine cooperation between relevant departments)
- ensuring that all EU websites, including those of individual Commissioners, present a **coherent and consistent brand image** to users

Two-way communication and new media

The Internet hosts a huge range of conversations each day, with discussion forums, blogs and social networks on all kinds of topics. Online versions of newspapers and TV channels now give users the opportunity to comment on news, opinion pieces, articles, and editorials. Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter etc) offer great opportunities to engage in dialogue with citizens and interested parties, to mobilise support for the European project, and to share information and ideas about the EU more widely than virtually any other medium.

We should:

- **encourage / empower Commission staff** to use social networks to communicate also about their work via blogs, social networks etc...
- be aware **that participating in social networks is not a one-off**. It requires continuous presence and thus draws heavily on human resources
- **make intelligent use of social networking platforms** (Facebook, Twitter etc...) to ensure maximum visibility for the EU and offer new opportunities for public engagement with the Commission
- **make judicious use of the networking opportunities of the internet**, taking on board possible concerns with regard to privacy protection, copyright, and sustainability

To do all this, web communication must be part of the Commission's core business. We should:

- give web communication **resources and priority**ⁱⁱ commensurate with its role as the primary means of interacting with the public and the press
- provide continuous **investment in training** to ensure staff attitudes and expertise keep pace with rapid developing changes in technology and communications culture.

We will need a major shift in attitude to break away from the one-way, top-down communication culture, still prevalent in many parts of the organisation, and develop an in-house communication culture that encourages and empowers staff across the organisation to use the internet to interact with people.

Political commitment and leadership from the new Commission will therefore be crucial in ensuring that our organisation can and will fully exploit the potential of online communication.

Yours faithfully,

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i As part of an internet strategy adopted by the Commission in December 2007, each Directorate General has appointed an internet editor.

ii Strong central coordination is essential to ensure quality and consistency in our web communication. Yet only some 20 people are currently assigned to this work in DG COMM (compare this with the contrasting figure for Obama's social media campaign team consisted of some 100 staff and 30 volunteers at headquarters, and some 40 in the country, the EP has 27 people working on their site, including facebook etc; and Ikea has 923 staff working on the corporate website).