

The European institutions on the web: europa - reaching out to the world

(this is the second of two articles on europa to be published in the January 1999 issue of *European Information – Journal of the European Information Association*; the October 1998 issue included results of the most recent europa user survey)

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Introduction

In February 1995, the European Commission hosted a G7 Ministerial meeting in Brussels dedicated to the 'Information Society'. On this occasion, the Commission launched its internet server, 'europa', which was to become very quickly the inter-institutional server of the European Union institutions. Today this server hosts information from the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers, the Commission, the Court of Justice and the Court of Auditors, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, the European Investment Bank and the European Central Bank. It also gives access to a series of specialised agencies working for the European institutions.

Initially intended to be a modest site linked to that particular event, europa proved to be a success from the outset and the Commission, leading the way forward among public institutions in Europe, decided to turn europa into a server providing both general and specialist information on all subjects covered by the Treaties. The scheme was launched at the initiative of DG X (the Directorate-General for Information, Communication, Culture and Audio-visual Media), with the assistance of the Secretariat-General and the Information Technology Directorate. In July 1995 the importance of the internet as a means of communication was confirmed and the setting up of a single central server, europa, to disseminate information about the Commission's work to the outside world was approved.

The purpose of europa is to meet the information needs of the general public, and those of specialist groups such as journalists, government departments, businesses, university teachers and researchers, and students. Since it was first set up a little over three years ago, europa has been constantly developing at a very rapid pace. Not only is the number of documents on offer to Europe's citizens growing steadily, but also the actual design of the site has been expanded considerably, culminating in today's inter-institutional, multilingual site.

Whereas in January 1996 the number of hits per day was only 27,643, in December that year it had already reached 73,139 (although the highest figure was achieved in November, with 92,706 hits per day).

1997 saw europa's use soar, starting in January with 129,208 hits. November 1997 was the absolute hit of the year: 721,605 hits per day.

At the beginning of 1998, the number of hits per day was still soaring: rising from 904,826 in January, it culminated in November at 1,819,482. In the meantime, statistics have been fine-tuned and use real document hits, which is a better yardstick than overall hits. europa's popularity amounted in November to 291,984 documents consulted per day (equivalent to 1,819,482 hits per day).

A few statistics on europa

Year	Overall hits per day	Document hits per day
January 1996	27,643	unknown
November 1996	92,706	14,420
December 1996	73,139	15,273
January 1997	129,208	16,823
November 1997	721,605	157,959
December 1997	670,579	158,342
January 1998	904,826	170,203
September 1998	1,247,745	227,780
November 1998	1,819,482	291,984

So, at the end of the day, the europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>) lets you reach out to the whole world (with one single address) and gives you 24 hour a day, 7 day-a-week access to information from the European Union.

Staff and management

europa is co-ordinated centrally by Directorate General X (DG X). In each General Directorate (a DG is equivalent to a Ministerial Department) a team is developing the DG's own site. DG X, through its Unit D-2 'information online', is responsible for the general co-ordination of the server within the Commission. Its main tasks are: to co-ordinate information between DGs; to check quality and consistency; to give clearance for the production of documents; to update the 'What's new?' page; to supply statistics on access; to promote europa both within the Commission - via chats and a forum - and in the outside world; to create a documentary database; and to improve user access to documents.

Some high level groups involving the Secretary-General determine the general policy and strategy on online information for the Commission. An Inter-institutional Task Force on the Internet was set up in 1996 to co-ordinate the content, layout, management and certain technical aspects of shared pages.

Different working groups have been set-up to manage this huge server:

- the Internet inter-institutional Editorial Board (meeting approximately five times a year) - a successor to the Inter-institutional Task Force on the Internet set up in 1996.
- the europa editorial Board (30 persons meeting about once a month). This Editorial Board deals with any major change to the structure or layout of a DG's or Commission's homepage and any significant new site or service. It gives its opinion on layout, links, navigational features and coherence with other europa pages.
- the europa Forum (over 40 people meeting periodically). This forum consists of a virtual and a real forum. They both allow all those dealing with the dissemination of information on europa to discuss questions of general interest.

europa is very tightly staffed considering that it is an inter-institutional server in 11 languages, which is used all over the world by a mixed user population. Within DG X, the Web team consists of three staff, plus one person dealing almost exclusively with co-ordination and management issues. Each department (the Commission has about 40 departments) has at least one person responsible for

its site, which means about 40 staff, with a similar figure for each institution ie 7-10 people for the other institutions.

In these different working parties, each service is very often, but not necessarily always, represented by one representative dealing mostly with editorial issues and one dealing with technical questions. The IT team (which is also fairly small - 10 people altogether working on europa) is centrally located in Luxembourg and manages not only the internet but also the intranet server and many other IT tools.

The expertise of people working for europa is multifold. Some EC officials fulfil mainly managerial tasks, but some might also be web experts, notably within departments. Most teams are backed by consultants working intra muros which allows for interactive collaboration, other consultants are engaged by external firms which hire them to fulfil tasks described in technical specifications which have been submitted for tender. File transfer usually happens from inside and rarely from outside. Employment possibilities are very limited due to modest financial resources.

Updating europa

europa is constantly being updated on a daily basis as the 'What's New?' heading shows.

An Editorial Board has worked out very precise guidelines, which have to be complied with in order to avoid chaos. A decentralised server like europa has to be co-ordinated centrally by an Editorial Committee, whilst preserving the image of each individual server. This Committee sets the guidelines, but within each institution an Editorial Committee, in our case exclusively for the Commission, tries to put into practice these guidelines and co-ordinates the efforts deployed by 40 or so departments.

An 'Information Providers' Guide' has been drafted by a working party, which establishes rules to be (preferably) complied with. These guidelines relate to three areas: editorial (general principles, structure and management), technical (design of documents, production tools) and graphical (templates, icons, navigation, etc).

Since all departments are represented on europa, each one is responsible for maintaining its own pages, and aims to offer a dynamic, multilingual and up-to-date service. Each team updates the test server, which allows for consistency and links checking, then sends a request for final updating. If everything is all right, the information is put onto the production server.

Multilingualism

europa enjoys a unique position in the web environment, for it is a truly multilingual server with the 11 official languages of the European Union. The principles applied read as follows: general information targeting the general public must be available in all 11 Community languages, whereas more specialised information must be published in at least two languages - depending on the possibilities open to each service - and in particular in the languages most widely used by the target groups concerned. Homepages and index pages must be - and are - available in 11 languages. Official documents must be published in the 11 Community languages, depending on availability.

In practice, this means navigation in 11 languages at least for the main headings. English remains, like on any internet site, the preferred language, but the share of other languages is steadily increasing. Texts on truly multilingual sites – ie in 11 languages – are translated by the Translation Service of the Commission (for the part of the server dedicated to the Commission) which does an excellent job, sending the documents back in HTML format. Multilingualism remains a strong constraint, but can be mastered.

Other institutional servers on europa

The fact that different servers (of other institutions) coexist on europa does not lead to frictions. They are competitors and allies at the same time. For obvious reasons, information coming from the European institutions and destined for any of its 370 million citizens should be easily understandable, reliable and as exhaustive as possible, and should not be contradictory.

The europa homepage is the starting point for access to the web documents of all the European institutions. Although europa is an inter-institutional site, this does not mean that all web pages must be centralised on a single server. The upper level of directories on the europa server reflects this organisational structure.

The site is divided into a number of reserved areas corresponding to the four main divisions in europa and to the different institutions. Some institutions, including the Commission, store all their pages on the europa server; others have a point of entry on europa and direct users immediately to their own server.

The europa address (<http://europa.eu.int>) gives access to a multilingual page displaying the word for "welcome" in 11 languages. The user then chooses his or her language to access the corresponding homepage. The present homepage contains only four entries (compared with 12 in the previous version): ABC, News, Institutions, and Policies. The entry 'institutions' leads to the servers of the other institutions. The different departments of the Commission are feeding the Commission pages.

All things being equal, it is a complex structure fairly similar to a railway station. In the central station of a big city, you have the choice between different destinations and, according to where you want to go, you will not always take the same train nor select the same railway company.

How will europa develop in future?

Teams working with their noses to the grindstone have very little time to gaze into the crystal ball, so the future of europa, at least as far as languages and enlargement are concerned, is not yet a cause for concern. The expression "tomorrow is another day" applies very well in this context. More demands on the server, more languages when new countries join the EU, all this will have to be faced by decision makers. This can only be done with appropriate means, be they budgetary or human. Decision makers will have to understand that electronic information (even if it is very cost effective) will have to rely on sufficient staff and budget just like any other type of information.

In any case, 1998 and the year to come have brought, and will bring, revolution in the way documentation on Community legislation is being disseminated. The EUR-LEX project allows for online reading and retrieving of the *Official Journal* and of the Community legislation in force. This is a real revolution that has to be carried to its very end, making the European institutions very close to the citizen. europa hosts in the meantime databases on the Common Foreign and Security

Policy, and on co-operation in the fields of Justice and Home Affairs, (under the aegis of the Council of Ministers site). These matters are at the very heart of present discussions on the future of the EU.

How to improve information retrieval on such a huge server like europa remains a real challenge. A search engine is not necessarily a panacea, since no matter what search engine is selected, retrieval still has its limits and constraints. Some improvements are underway, like adding metatags, creating subheadings, and adding an index. In the long run these improvements will contribute to making europa more user-friendly. In the meantime, the users' survey conducted in 1998 and mentioned in the October issue of European Information gives every reason to believe that work so far is on the right track, but the journey is not over. Will it ever be?

Conclusion

Designing, managing and updating the europa server is a fascinating task. It involves many skills and many people. The result of such an interservice collaboration is tremendous. Management, languages, contents, timing, technical skills and network issues among others have to be tackled in such a way as to provide a service online, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The sheer fact that it works and that any citizen, ie you and me, can use this server is the proof that dedicated people can make it happen. The different teams involved will go on doing their best to improve the service any citizen has a right to have. The suggestion box of the europa server is no doubt a way to contribute to this common goal.

Acknowledgments

I am most indebted to various colleagues on the europa team who have contributed to this paper either by their work, their advice or their written contributions, Marlène Cattelain for the part relating to the general design of europa, Martina André-Kaut and Marta Alonso for the management side, Beata Ofianewska for some technical and managerial aspects. Many thanks also to Steve Morris for proof reading this text. Last, but not least, many thanks to Lindsay Armstrong whose managerial guidance and advice allowed this text to be improved and above all published. The background information available on europa and on the intranet of the Commission was most invaluable.