The electronic EU - managing information and politics in the information age

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Since its wider use through the global users' community, Internet has brought about tremendous changes as to the way information is produced and distributed. The Commission - even if it is a big administration - is no exception to the rule.

Do not expect me in the framework of this conference whose title is: "The electronic EU - managing information and politics in the information age" to deal with issues like e-commerce or e-business or telecom issues. I will restrict my intervention to telling you how information is managed via the internet and intranet servers of the European Commission. As to the way politics is conducted in the information age through these marvellous vectors, it will more or less result from the presentation of electronic information.

1. Introduction

a) Launch of EUROPA (internet server)

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. 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 five 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 January 2000 to 741,483 documents consulted per day (equivalent to 22,985,302 hits per month). The figures are still rising.

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.

b) Launch of EUROPAplus (intranet server)

At the time EUROPA was launched, Internet access was fairly thinly spread within the institution, which meant that very few EC officials could see the Internet server developed by the Commission.

A mirror copy of EUROPA was put on an intranet server so that officials could see EUROPA on-line. EUROPAplus started with 500 pilot users. This is how EUROPAplus was in fact created, in April 1995. It had been named EUROPAplus, because it offered a plus compared with the mirror copy of EUROPA. The plus was all the internal information which could be put on line under the leadership of the Secretariat general, the former DG X[1], the former DG IX[2] and the IT-Directorate[3].

The intranet grew as quickly as EUROPA and became very popular. An average of 180.000 documents are consulted per working day. In the meantime, all officials of the Commission have an Internet access, which allows making EUROPAplus a very powerful portal.

c) Some usage statistics

EUROPA	1999-2000	EUROPAplus	1999-2000
Document hits per day	March 871.170	*Document hits per day*	March 160.912
	Feb. 761.562		Feb. 172.703
	Jan. 741.483		Jan. 168.808
	Dec. 597.709		Dec. 146.053
	Nov. 695.801		Nov. 157.410
Total document hits per month		*Total document hits per month*	
	March 27.006.269		March 3.700.986
	Feb. 22.085.302		Feb. 3.454.073
	Jan. 22.985.958		Jan. 3.376.161
	Dec. 18.528.988		Dec. 2.190.796
	Nov. 20.874.038		Nov. 3.148.214

2. Staff and management of EUROPA and EUROPAplus

Both servers are managed with a very light staff structure. Centrally only 6 people deal with EUROPA, whereas EUROPAplus central team only has 3. But, in the different DGs people are working for both servers.

Globally around 82 people work in the Commission (Publications Office and DG Personnel and Administration excluded) at managing and developing web sites for DGs and services on EUROPA and EUROPAplus. Only 31% of them work full time for the servers. Thirty-two percent work half time and 35% less than half time. One may estimate that a total of 60 men/year are dedicated by DGs and services to animating their web sites, i.e. less than 2 people per DG and service.

In around 80% of DGs and services, the same team (one to three people in the vast majority of cases) is responsible for EUROPA and EUROPAplus and local intranets (DGs') at the same time. Working for

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[1] Directorate-General "Information, Communication, Culture, Audiovisual". In the whole text DG stands for Directorate-General
[2] Personnel and Administration
[3] In French "Direction Informatique" equivalent to the Information Technology Department

EUROPA tends to absorb more time than working for EUROPAplus. The position in the hierarchy of teams working for EUROPA and EUROPAplus varies a lot from service to service. They can be in units dealing with information, documentation or even with IT.

The following bodies are involved in the management of both servers

a) The GCOM-IT is the strategic body which takes the main political decisions on overall architecture, budget, main streams of orientations of the internet and intranet servers, contents, IT infrastructure and support. It is chaired by the Secretary general, the vice-presidency is in the hands of the DG Administration. The permanent members are: IT-Department, Budget and Audit DGs and the Legal Service. Are also members: the Press & Communication Service, DGs Enterprise, Information Society and Statistical Office.

b) The IT-department and its Data Centre in Luxembourg are in charge of the servers (machines), telecommunications, safety issues and general IT policy.

c) The servers were managed centrally by a small team of people belonging to the Personnel and Administration Directorate-General. The central team was responsible for co-ordinating the non-technical aspects of the interinstitutional server (coherence of approach, of contents) and relations with all the departmental information providers which feed in the servers. It also manages all the new features and the massige flow of information sent by the administration to its staff. This team is also the driving force and catalyst of new initiatives. Since 3rd April 2000 the two teams are separated, EUROPA being managed from within the Press and Communication Service (PCS) and EUROPAplus from DG Personnel and Administration.

d) Co-ordination is ensured via the EUROPA and EUROPAplus Editorial Committees consisting of the representatives of DGs and services. Constant back up is delivered by the DI teams according to the help needed (telecoms, network, officials' Internet access, search engine, etc.). A Guide for the information's providers has been specially designed for EUROPA and EUROPAplus, ensuring a homogeneous look and feel (available on-line on the intranet and on EUROPA but password protected).

Some development work (formatting in html, conception of indexes, graphical design, setting up of entire sites, etc.) is being subcontracted in a very limited way to external firms under special call for tender contracts.

The institution has been able to develop the servers extensively whilst relying on the goodwill of its employees. Future developments will have to be based on solid foundations, i.e. on professionalisation of information production and dissemination.

3. Nature of EUROPAplus

In fact, EUROPAplus is an Extranet.

- available for the staff working in the premises of the Commission (should be around 20.000 people)
- available in 23 offices of representation of the European Commission in the 15 members states of the EU
- available in some delegations in the whole world (there are 100 odd delegations of the European Commission in the world)
- altogether around 30.000 people

But the success is so big that a lot of other users knock at the door:
- the agencies (like the EAMA in London)
- the retired officials (around 10.000 of them)
- the officials travelling on duty
- free-lance translators and interpreters working for the European Commission

In order to cope with new demands, we might end up putting our intranet as a reverse proxy on Internet accessible to the categories described just before, splitting the intranet into two parts :

- one accessible with an internal address and only dedicated to the internal staff stricto sensu
- one accessible on the Internet proxy giving access from outside with passwords to specific populations.

4. Specific features of EUROPAplus

The Homepage of EUROPAplus has been designed as a portal giving access to :

- EUROPA, the internet server of the European Commission (you do not have to leave EUROPAplus to enter EUROPA)
- the specific servers of the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers
- the main sources of news be they internal or external (bought-in via licence agreements or otherwise)
- the collection of legislative documents produced by the Commission
- a collection of documents of an administrative nature (i.e. produced by one of the biggest departments of the European Commission, the DG responsible for personnel & administration).

Specific features can be described as follows:

- an index by theme (very useful to look for an information or a source of information)
- a search engine (Verity Search). This search engine allows for a search on
    - all the thematic indexes (search on 61 files)
    - all the documentary corpus (search on 364.217 files or documents)
- four information channels:
    - what's new ? (linked to a date) with an archive back to 1997
    - Notice Board (for events like conferences, exhibitions, etc.)
    - message box (stays on the server for as long as deemed necessary)
    - what's new of all the what's new (what is new on the sites not managed centrally)
- suggestion boxes
    EUROPAplus has different suggestion boxes (in different colours)
    - a central suggestion box accessible from the Homepage (yellow). The central team answers the emails each day as soon as they arrive.
    - specific suggestion boxes embedded in the specific sites belonging to certain information providers (blue). The IP answer themselves, the central team has no control over this and does not want any.
- business cards
    As an aid to communication between users and providers, "business cards" have been put more or less opposite the entry to each service (site or collection of documents). By clicking on the business card, one gets information about the service provider, title of the site, description of the service concerned, launching date, contact persons, suggestion box.

5. Advantages of an intranet like EUROPAplus

EUROPAplus has been an invaluable tool for transparency and for improving working methods

- an intranet is a marvellous tool for a central co-ordination but a decentralised production of information ("disseminate centrally but produce locally" could be the motto)
- SG Vista is a formidable tool for managing internal procedures
- 1.400 tons of paper have been saved since the administrative information material has stopped being distributed on paper and has been available only on line (with a few exceptions like notice boards at the entrance points of the 60 odd buildings of the Commission). Even the job vacancies are only available on line. The phone book is only electronic so is the Personnel directory (Guide des services).
- Commissioners and the College as such use EUROPAplus for transmitting important messages
- the press cuttings will be customised and will then contribute to paper savings
- a special site has been designed for and dedicated to the administrative reform under Vice-President Kinnock's aegis.

6. Some future developments concerning EUROPAplus

The fact that EUROPAplus is now run by the DG Personnel and Administration has probably made the DG more conscious of the fact that it has at its disposal a tremendous tool for internal communication. So the year 2000 will be full of novelties.

a) Internet address

EUROPAplus should in the course of the year migrate onto an internet address. This will make it easier for all sorts of new to define populations to access EUROPAplus. The intranet would then host everything which by definition does have a restricted distribution. DGs would then define themselves what should be restricted and what should be accessed widely by groups of people belonging to the wide family of the European institutions, thus making redundant the interinstitutional intranet EUROPATeam. Technically, this will be quite a challenge and will split information into two categories.

b) Best practice

EUROPAplus has been selected by the Commission as a best practice to be shown in Lisbon in May 2000 during the conference on best practices in public administration in the European Union. This is certainly the proof that EUROPAplus has been recognised in its function as vector of information.

c) Local intranets

We hope that local intranets, i.e. those only accessible to limited populations (e.g. within a DG), will migrate onto EUROPAplus. DG Development has for instance already put its intranet on EUROPAplus, which is then accessible to everybody within the Commission, except some sub-collections of documents with restricted access.

d) Platform for exchanging information

Lately, some DGs have asked whether they could not use the intranet as a sort of platform for information exchange between DGs. In other words, the "leading" DG (in charge of a dossier) would like to know what other DGs think of its documents on a given subject. So it puts documents on the intranet for everybody to see. So instead of using heavy procedures like electronic inter-service consultations, it puts on the intranet a site containing all the information it would like other DGs to read. This information is seen, read or downloaded by others and after being processed within a given DG, it is sent back to the leading DG. The latter can then put on its site the new documents. This is fairly similar to a workflow procedure. The advantage is that participants can interact without the intervention of a central team, which only sees to it

that certain rules, mostly web site management rules, are complied with. A lot of information is already exchanged between producers and users without any interference of EUROPAplus managers.

7. Some future developments concerning EUROPA

a) The white paper on administrative reform

The white paper mentions EUROPA in part 2, the action plan, notably in Chapter II, a culture based on service. In point VI of this chapter, one finds a text relating to "Towards the e-Commission".
Action 1 is targeting ICT and communication networks
Action 2 is at the core of EUROPA and EUROPAplus missions and is defined as meeting users' needs, internally and externally, which implies:
- "feed-back mechanisms and technology developments
- moving to interactive policy consultations using Internet
- constant improvement of the "EUROPA" Web site. The Commission must allocate the necessary financial, technical and personnel resources for constant maintenance and upgrading of the "EUROPA" site. Defining the necessary resources will thus be the first step. "EUROPA" is already a well-known site, and maintaining it up to highest standards is vital for the e-Commission's image and credibility."

b) Thematic sites and DGs sites on EUROPA

Reform of the structures of the Commission has an important impact on EUROPA. The appointment of a new Commission in September 1999 was accompanied by a reorganisation of the Commission administration. There are now 36 departments. Directorates-general are no longer referred to by number. Changes are being made to the Commission's web site to reflect the new structure. Users can choose between thematic (area of activity) or institutional (Commissioner or department responsible) navigation.

Thematic navigation is now being designed and developed but the whole operation is far from being finished.

What follows is just an outline of present thinking and can in no way be considered as the final word. Negotiations between DGs will still be necessary, and it is now difficult to tell when this exercise will be over.

The aim is to have on EUROPA all sorts of sites subdivided in different categories:
- DGs' sites (administrative information only)
- thematic sites (like environment, research, health, etc.) is the core information
- service sites (like libraries, publications, translation service, etc.)
- target group sites (like business, campus, citizens, media, youth, etc.)

Each DG is responsible for updating and improving its DGs sites. DGs are free to adapt their sites to each DG's or theme's specific needs as long as they follow certain rules like:

- compliance with the general guidelines of the Information Providers guide
- keeping the distinction between the DG site and thematic site
- keeping if possible the same URL for the DG site
- keeping the 11 languages of the DG homepage
- creating the 'theme' homepage in 11 languages.

Most subject information should be located on the "thematic site", the DG site being a "passport" or profile of the DG.

8. Some sensitive issues

Managing an intranet like EUROPAplus is a tremendous task, the job is never finished.

One has to get used to certain aspects :

- the intranet belongs to everyone and to no-one in particular
- statistics are difficult to establish (they can only be fine-tuned manually) and not necessarily reliable. Yet, they are crucial in the healthy competition between services to be on the hit parade.
- bad habits persist. Using generic emails channels instead of using the intranet as a quick vector for communication (this saves bandwidth !)
- training remains a huge problem, since it involves important costs. It means training different populations for different purposes (browsing, writing html, doing ftp, etc..)
- regular updating must become a reflex
- retention of information, whether voluntary or not, should be discouraged
- the overflow of information creates a certain weariness. Some people do not read thoroughly enough important information
- duplication of information on different intranets can become a nuisance
- attracting various in-house bulletins onto the intranet is a difficult issue but worth trying (we are just launching an exercise of this sort with the DG's Newsletters)
- services dealing with very sensitive political issues would tend to neglect intranets (or use them only in the very ultimate phase) since they would rely more on traditional means of information dissemination, because they have the impression they have them more under control and are afraid of this electronic means, which seems less controllable
- it is wrong to assume that most users should read most information on the intranet. No, just like before, some people try to get informed mainly in their own fields of competence and work. The intranet only gives them the possibility to see further than their personal horizon (provided they have time for that).
- customising information according to each individual's needs is an almost impossible task, but new tools are emerging. Trying to take the commercial portals as an example creates illusions, since these have commercial objectives and do not customise as you would like it as a normal end-user.

9. Conclusions

EUROPA has been developed in the urgency of the G7 conference mentioned earlier. So has been the intranet EUROPAplus. After 5 years of experience, one can say that both servers are a success story. This development brought the Commission to allow access to internet for all its staff.

Managing the intranet of the Commission was an invaluable exercise, since we discovered what we expected, mastering information management remains the key issue. Some good thinking is no doubt vital to get out of the vicious circle IT or information domination.

Many high level managers within the Commission - notably the computer illiterate or computer neutral - are convinced that intranets are a question of technology, which means for them a question they do not have to bother about since others are in charge. It should not be so, especially since information remains the core business and if one considers the fact that economists find little correlation between IT's expenditures and financial performance. But minds are evolving slowly ant the sheer bulk of information to be conveyed will push people to adopt other attitudes.

We must redress the balance and focus on information. Every business is an information business. How can we try to be more convincing and efficient ? We shall have to see how each employee uses the intranet, there are as many ways of using an intranet as there are employees. We will have to discover who actually uses our information, observe how the available information is used, work more closely with librarians and adopt a more journalistic approach, which by the way makes the success of TV. Of course, these aspects have always been at the back of our minds but reactions show that these features have not been taken sufficiently into consideration. We will have to organise many meetings to convince all that managing information is everybody's business, we shall have to create more awareness, to train as much staff as

possible. From data processing we shall have to switch to knowledge processing. Here lies the real challenge and probably the key to success !

Disclaimer: the views and comments reflected in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official European Commission policy.