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Internet & Intranet servers of the European Commission, similarities and differences

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Abstract: *Both Internet (EUROPA) and Intranet (EUROPAplus) servers of the European Commission were set up in 1995. Since then they both have shown a tremendous development and have been managed by the same editorial board. Yet, their target audiences and objectives are very different. Future developments might show that present solutions will have to adapt due to differences of objectives, target audiences and other reasons. Differences and similarities between Internet and Intranet servers will be pinpointed and aspects like information retrieval, languages, search engines capacities and interactivity will be mentioned.*

Keywords: *intranet, internet, European Commission, management, editing, co-ordination, forum, library, information providers' guide, information retrieval, search engine, multilingualism, citizen, index*

1. Introduction

Both Internet (EUROPA) and Intranet (EUROPAplus) servers of the European Commission were set up at the beginning of 1995. It is worth noting that EUROPAplus was launched only 3 months after EUROPA.

In February 1995 in Brussels, the European Commission had hosted the G7¹ Ministerial meeting dedicated to the Information Society and disclosed its own Internet server, which was to become very quickly the interinstitutional server of the European Union institutions. In other words very soon it was hosting web sites of all EU institutions.

Without any doubt, both servers have been an immediate and lasting success. After 3 years of existence, they have proved their tremendous value not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Statistics in June 1998 revealed 34.384.419 hits for EUROPA (or 5.903.238 document hits) and 10.202.091 hits for EUROPAplus (or 2.811.114 document hits).

The Intranet server, EUROPAplus, started only as a mirror copy of the Internet server but in a few months' time, it soared to unexpected levels of interest. What at the time was considered as a drawback, i.e. the fact that only a happy few had an Internet connection, became an excellent opportunity for the

¹ Group of the 7 richest nations in the world. In the meantime it has become G8 with the inclusion of Russia

intranet, since it was there to allow officials to surf internally on what the Internet server disclosed to the outside world about the Commission.

2. Definition

EUROPPlus is an **extended Intranet** destined for the officials of the European Commission. It reaches about 17,000 persons, principally in Brussels and Luxembourg, but also in 23 offices in the European Union and more than 100 delegations of the European Commission throughout the world.

It has become a management tool designed for and by the Commission's officials. Its aim is to create a corporate spirit and to give fast and user-friendly access to the main internal and external information sources. Furthermore, it should also contribute to reducing the quantity of printed material distributed within the Commission.

Although the server is generally presented in **English and French**, some sites exist only in French or only in English since it is assumed that both languages are generally understood within the Commission. Information can also be available in other languages than the two already mentioned, depending on who is producing the material. In June 1998 it contained more than 600.000 documents.

EUROPA was at the very beginning intended to be a modest site of the European Commission to be presented to the G7 meeting convened in Brussels in February 1995. But very soon, it became clear inside the institutions that there should be only one server for the whole Commission and for all other institutions. Driven by success, the Commission's Internet server became the **interinstitutional** site of all the European Union institutions at the Parliament's initiative, i.e. it now hosts the sites of the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the European Investment Bank and the European Monetary Institute. For the citizen access is made simple, one single address "europa.eu.int" gives him access to the whole range of information distributed on Internet by the EU institutions.

The server is **multilingual** (11 languages) and offers a citizen-friendly site. It contains a wide range of documents in excess of 600.000 (in June 1998) and at the end of 1998 with the addition of the European Law on line, the document repository will be in excess of 1.000.000 documents. It also gives access to a wide range of mailboxes, allows for chats on line and fora.

3. Development and management

Both servers developed very quickly and soon became huge sites. The development of the Internet server helped his small brother to come of age. When putting some information at the disposal of the entire world, i.e. any citizen wherever situated on the globe, one discovered that some **sensitive information** could also best be put on the **Intranet** server. Distribution would be fast, at very low cost and would even allow for widespread dissemination inside the services.

Migration of big internal management databases since then has started slowly but will very soon reach proportions undreamed of a year ago. The big advantage of this migration is that the information flow inside the Commission instead of being the privilege of data bases managers or their well trained users can be made accessible to any official, it is then up to the service concerned to decide whether sensitive internal information should be restricted and if yes to whom. Many new developments in this area ought to change the way information is processed and disseminated.

A recent **survey** finalised in June 1998 gives details about mostly used languages, user profiles, nationality, age, multilingualism and satisfaction and reveals very interesting features. For instance 54% of all survey respondents have completed a college or advanced degree, 82% of all survey respondents are EU15's citizens, most users belong to the age bracket 25-39, English remains the most spoken language on Europa but other languages have their niche, the degree of **satisfaction** is well above 50% for subjects as different as languages, interactivity, content and presentation.

4. Structure

EUROPA and EUROPPlus have entirely different structures in their information set-up. At the very beginning EUROPPlus was mostly a **document repository**, even if it hosted a few internal and external databases. So it was easier to conceive a Homepage and an alphabetical index intended to facilitate perusing the whole site. Furthermore much of the information it contained was supposed to be known, i.e. navigation could be more implicit since any official using EUROPPlus was ploughing through information more germane to him or her than on an Internet server.

EUROPA had an entirely different purpose, it had started as a Commission's site, evolved to a site hosting all the European institutions, the information had to be as **close** as possible **to the citizen**. The public at large was its main audience, the information had to be presented not in a hierarchical structure mirroring the Commission's services but in a user-friendly manner. In May 1998 EUROPA was awarded the Biarritz Grand Prix of the 28th International Audio-visual and Multimedia Festival. EUROPA has been unanimously selected as best Web site amongst some thirty sites. Some challengers included famous firms like l'Oréal, Bloomberg, Mercedes, Nokia, ZDF, Belgacom and Siemens... Richness and variety of the available information, interactivity, multilingualism and the success proven by statistics were at the heart of the decision.

5. Similarities

When looking back upon the last three years it remains difficult to realise that Internet tools like the browsers have **revolutionised** the information transfer inside and outside any corporation or administration. The sheer fact that a browser like Netscape (used within the European institutions) gives access to any information in a standardised way has suppressed barriers which were

common before owing to the proliferation of client-server interfaces or at the time databases were consulted using a line mode command language. Nowadays on any Web, be it an intranet or an extranet, information can easily be accessed and can come from almost any source: proprietary database, news feed, news integrating software, simple documents in pdf, word or html formats, etc.

At that level both servers are identical since they use **Internet tools** and are able to exchange any information wherever this information is located. They even share some common sources (notably CELEX², SCADplus³, EUR-LEX⁴, and RAPID⁵).

Information hosted on both servers emanates from the **same services** - at least as far as the Commission is concerned (i.e. the 35 odd departments), EUROPA having as specificity that it encompasses all the European institutions whereas EUROPAplus only deals with the Commission.

Both servers have different fora, which fulfil different purposes of **interactivity** but work in the same fashion. EUROPAplus has a forum on "Commission Direct"⁶, which is the electronic equivalent – though more exhaustive – of the paper version of the internal Bulletin. All sorts of subjects are dealt with, notably the question of languages within the Commission, impact of the euro on the European officials, reform of the statute, contacts with journalists. Depending on the sensitivity of the issue, this forum may be fairly busy.

EUROPA also has its own fora, mainly a **virtual and a real forum**, which were launched almost simultaneously. It all started with the wish to be able to join other interested officials and not only those convened officially to the different co-ordination meetings. So the aim was to discuss all aspects relating to the EUROPA server, i.e. launch new ideas, propose improvements, express criticism, ask questions to colleagues, inform colleagues about new Internet sites or tools. The virtual forum is fairly busy and is accompanied in parallel by a real forum organised regularly (approximately every 8 to 10 weeks) in informal and creative meetings with all persons involved in one way or another in the dissemination of information on EUROPA. The aim of these meetings is twofold: to make it possible to report on the latest developments of EUROPA and to give an outline of the projects to come.

² Data base on European Legislation, jurisprudence, preparatory acts, national measures and parliamentary questions

³ Useful information on European integration

⁴ European Union Law : Official Journal of the European Communities (both L and C series) published in the last twenty days, the Treaties, consolidated versions of existing legislation and recent judgements by the Court of Justice."

⁵ On-line database containing the full text of all press releases published by the Commission's Spokesman's Service

⁶ 'Commission Direct' is the internal paper Bulletin published by the Commission Services and sent around the world in 43.000 copies

6. Differences

Both servers are **managed** within the same team, with the same IT solutions (notably search engine) but the editorial boards were split during the autumn 1998.

EUROPA has in fact two **editorial boards**, an interinstitutional editorial board and an ordinary editorial board, the latter being shared with EUROPAplus. The editorial boards common to EUROPA & EUROPAplus are chaired by general Directorate X⁷ but include other general Directorates like general Directorate XII⁸, XIII⁹ and XXII¹⁰ and the Official Publications Office, the Secretariat General. The main tasks are: co-ordination, editorial responsibility, political and interdepartmental contacts, design of new projects, suggestions, participation in creating new projects, advice (choice of distribution medium, hypertext editing, etc.), hypertext editing, assessment, promotion, training, contacts with the IT directorate, answering questions. The editorial board meets once a month and has been very efficient for instance in producing an information providers' guide (IPG available on line for the persons concerned) which slowly but surely ensures a common look on all the web pages created by the Commission. I hasten to add that EUROPAplus also has its own information providers' guide.

EUROPA also has an **Internet** interinstitutional editorial Board that consists of representatives of all institutions present on EUROPA. His co-ordinating tasks are huge and range from nitty-gritty matters like a common search engine to the definition of political top priorities like identity of the institution providing the information, multilingualism, responsibility for the information provided, free or paying access to information and so on.

Information, although it emanates from the same persons, targets very different audiences (citizens or EC officials) and is presented in a different manner, EUROPA being mostly subject driven and EUROPAplus being freer in the presentation of the information it disseminates.

For the time being, EUROPA does not have yet an **alphabetical** or thematic **index**, even if the first homepages are designed per theme. EUROPAplus has a thematic index, which allows searching, i.e. one can browse the 26 odd pages of the index without having to navigate through the whole site. This makes searching easier, for the time being only in French but very soon in English. Whilst it is not excluded that a search on a given term does not deliver any result – the reason could simply be that this subject is not mentioned as a heading - the 26 odd pages of index give a fairly good overview of what the whole site has to offer.

Internet **chats** have happened on EUROPA on several occasions. Commissioner Oreja started the first chat on EUROPA on 18th June 1997 about

⁷ Directorate General X = Information, Communication, Culture, Audio-visual

⁸ Directorate General XII = Science, research & development

⁹ Directorate General XIII = Telecommunications, Information Market and Exploitation of Research

¹⁰ Directorate General XXII = Education, Training and Youth

the consequences of the Amsterdam Treaty, just one day after the hard negotiations had finished during the European Council. Commissioner Padraig Flynn answered more than 500 questions on 13th November 1997 just after the Job summit dedicated to unemployment questions. On 5th November 1997, Mrs Bonino was eager to reply to more than 300 answers during a chat dedicated to food policy and consumers' fear as to the mad cow crisis. Commissioner Yves-Thibault de Silguy enjoyed having on line on 6th May 1998, just after the « historic » Special Economic and Monetary Union Councils of 1-3 May, 350 people who fired at him and the teams present not less than 2.000 questions during the two-hour live dialogue. Chats have not taken place on EUROPAplus yet but the intention is certainly to give for instance a Commissioner the possibility to address the officials directly on the Intranet.

EUROPA & EUROPAplus both have **suggestion boxes** at their disposal to get the feedback from satisfied or unsatisfied users. Since both target publics are entirely different (citizens in one case and officials in the other), the suggestion or mailboxes are used to communicate in a different fashion.

EUROPA has a question and answer service for the citizens called EUROPE DIRECT. It provides quick answers to general requests for information addressed to the Commission via the Europa server mailbox, telephone, letter and fax and offers the possibility to citizens of communicating with the Commission in their mother tongue. Answers are given within a short delay corresponding to the time needed for the operators to find the relevant information on the Europa server, internal databases or via personal contacts with the Information Officers, Information Correspondents, Documentalists, Librarians, Archivists within each Directorate General or Service. The Europe Direct pilot scheme which, since it was set up in autumn 1996, has answered more than 15 000 questions from members of the public posted by electronic mail to the mailbox on the Europa server. To meet this need Europe Direct will soon be accessible not only by electronic mail, but also by telephone: a call centre is to be set up to deal directly with enquiries from members of the public and companies.

EUROPAplus has two layers of suggestion boxes: a generic suggestion box accessible directly from the Homepage and as many suggestion boxes as there are important sites available on EUROPAplus (for the time being more than a hundred). The generic suggestion box receives many requests each day but most questions deals with IT aspects, links, retrieval of a given information but more rarely with fundamental issues. Lately, the new thematic index has given rise to many interesting comments, revealing how difficult it is to encompass in an index all retrieval aspects of all users, since their needs are widely different. The suggestion boxes linked to a given site are also a very good means of focussing the relevant information to the site responsible. On the whole, these suggestion boxes have led to a much appreciated interactivity.

7. Difficulties

Managing two big servers like EUROPA & EUROPAplus is a tremendous task. Sixty persons in different departments are busy feeding in information onto the multiple sites of EUROPA & EUROPAplus. The co-ordinating teams within general Directorate X are for their part fairly small, seven for EUROPA and four for EUROPAplus. Managing those servers has revealed how important synergies are between the different players: IT specialists, journalists, managers. Interdisciplinary co-operation is an essential feature. One should never forget that Internet and Intranet servers belong to no-one in particular but to everybody.

Finding the appropriate **search engine** is not an easy task, neither is the making of reliable statistics nor the creation of alphabetical or thematic indexes. On any Intranet or Internet server indexes should make browsing easier but above lead to a reliable retrieval rate of relevant documents. **Information retrieval** is too often conceived as retrieval from the whole corpus of texts, which is an almost impossible task for any search engine however clever their conception and functioning. Even meta-tags will not be the panacea. Linguistic engineering tools will help to make search engines more 'intelligent' in their retrieval function. Yet, I would personally tend to think that information retrieval should be a mix of multiple solutions offered to the user, which give him different possibilities according to his level of skill in IT, in information retrieval and in information at all. Making it possible for the search engine to search on the whole corpus, on the thematic or alphabetical indexes (like on EUROPAplus), on the site maps (being able to search on a given URL¹¹ or a string of a URL or to exclude a given URL or a string of a URL) would give the user power capacities presently unknown.

8. Conclusions

Internet and Intranet servers have changed the way information is transmitted. They have given to managers and staff at large very efficient tools. Minds must now adapt to these new situations, since sharing information i.e. good knowledge management is vital. Fears of losing hold of one's power should be overcome and are counter-productive. At the end of the day information is only a raw material. What matters is that information be turned into knowledge and know-how. The mere dissemination of information will never replace human skills: acquiring knowledge and developing know-how. These are two essential human features, any Web be it internal or external cannot replace this invaluable experience.

The conclusion one may draw from the comparison between internet and intranet servers is that they cannot change the nature of information; internal and external information remain two fundamentally different exercises.

¹¹ URL = Uniform Resource Locator . Every page on a Website has a unique URL just like every person has a unique palm print. A URL is text used for identifying and addressing an item in a computer network. It provides location information.

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Disclaimer

The views and comments reflected in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the official European Commission policy.

I	EUROPA	EUROPPlus
	Internet server	Intranet server
<i>Public</i>	the world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a single address • http://europa.eu.int 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17,000 officials • 23 offices in the Union, JRC • > 100 delegations in the world
<i>Information providers</i>	all EU institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Commission • European Parliament • Council of Ministers • Court of Justice • Court of Auditors • Economic and Social Committee • Committee of the Regions • European Investment Bank 	Commission services, Representation Offices and Delegations and some external information providers
<i>Launch date</i>	February 1995	April 1995, originally conceived as mirror of EUROPA
<i>Number of hits (October 98)</i>	47,002,572	13,872,971
<i>Number of document hits (October 98)</i>	8,518,099	2,544,890
<i>Number of indexed documents on site</i>	757,957 (1 st December 98)	826,232 (1 st December 98)
<i>Languages</i>	all 11 official EU languages	mostly French & English
<i>Editorial Board</i>	own editorial boards	own editorial board
<i>Index</i>	in preparation	thematic
<i>Search engine</i>	yes	yes, also search capacity on the thematic index
<i>Internet chats</i>	yes	not yet
<i>Suggestion boxes</i>	yes: one central and also per site, some also per Commission's DG	yes one central and sometimes per site

II	EUROPA	EUROPAplus
	Internet server	Intranet server
<i>Targeting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general public (media, journalists, entrepreneurs, researchers, academic world, public administration, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission officials
<i>Aim</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to give a wide range of information on EU activities and improve transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to improve information and communication
<i>Content</i>	any information which has to do with the EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internal information, more sensitive inform. • migration of internal databases on the intranet with Web interfaces • access to external information (news, db)
<i>Information set-up</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focussing on needs of general public • preferably access by theme and not according to hierarchy of Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more freedom in structuring information since audience knows subject
<i>Interactivity (Forum)</i>	yes, for example Training Forum of DG 22 (Education, Training and Youth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum on Commission en Direct (internal weekly Staff Bulletin) • Virtual & Real Forum for EUROPA correspondents
<i>Editorial Boards</i>	two editorial boards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inter-institutional board (meeting approx, five times a year) • ordinary board (meeting once a month) 	one editorial Board : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • editorial board chaired by DG X • members are a few selected DGs • IT representation is important
<i>Chats</i>	18 th June 1997 Commissioner Oreja <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on Amsterdam Treaty 13 th Nov. 1997 Commissioner Flynn <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unemployment, 500 questions 6 th May 1998 Commissioner De Silguy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E.M.U. 2,000 questions, 350 participants 	Not organised yet but envisaged

III	EUROPA	EUROPPlus
	Internet server	Intranet server
<i>Suggestion boxes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EUROPE Direct central m@ilbox • suggestion boxes for each DG (17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one central suggestion box (via Homepage) • as many boxes as there are important sites
<i>EUROPE Direct</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • question and answer service for the citizen • addressed via mailbox, phone, letter and fax • rapid answers (within 48 hours) • internal network deals with very specialised questions • set up in autumn 1996 • since then has answered some 15,000 questions posted by email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • does not exist on EUROPPlus
<i>Information retrieval</i>	<p>Structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information organised by themes • within individual sites information also organised according to service structure • alphabetic index only available for the European Parliament site but also within some DG sites, generic EUROPA alphabetic index in preparation <p>Search engine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • search using boolean operators with help files (simple or advanced search) • search engine spots the occurrence of the keyword in text • search by date or by format (PDF, HTML, Word) 	<p>Structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information organised by themes but presented in alphabetical order in an index • the index is the most interesting entry point <p>Search engine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allows search only on the index (spotting the occurrence of a word in the text) • or search of the whole site (spotting the occurrence of a word in the text)

