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Can online communication strengthen the EU's relationship with young citizens in Finland?

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Introduction

In the last five years the EU has increased its authority on various issues, as well as its visibility. Nevertheless, the impact that the European Union (EU) has had on the lives of citizens in its Member States is often underestimated, and support towards its institutions has declined in recent years,¹ especially among young people. The Eurobarometer survey of December 2005 (EB, 2005) made clear that only 55 percent of European youth aged between twenty and twenty-four years old thinks that in five years' time they would like the EU to play a more important role in their lives. The same study indicated that only 40 percent of youth feel that their voice is heard in the EU.

If the EU is unable to reach its younger audience, the distance between the youth and the EU will enlarge and in the future this segment of the public will have become estranged from EU institutions and activities. Communication, and particularly new media such as online communication, may play an essential role in narrowing the gap between the two parties. The European Commission has only in the last few years recognised the relevance of this new technology: the first clear acknowledgement came in 2006, when the European Commission, in the White Paper on a European Communication Policy (CEC, 2006a) and in the Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (CEC, 2006b), stress the necessity of adopting new information and communication technologies as an integral part of the EU's future communication strategies. This recognition indicates the willingness of the European Commission to consider the European youth as one of the important stakeholders² for actions aimed at involving citizens in EU policy-making.

This chapter deals with the communication flow between the EU and its young citizens, and how those young citizens utilise available online communication tools of the EU and citizen blogs. For this purpose we conducted a small online survey and individual follow-up interviews with the same respondents. The study took into consideration mainly young people of twenty to thirty years old in Finland and aimed to discover how young Finns perceive and utilise the online communication means designed by the EU. In addition we conducted a content analysis of online citizen blogs that concentrate on particular issues of EU policies. The central research question is: how does the EU employ online tools to communicate with young citizens, and to what extent

¹ According to her study based on data from the Standard Eurobarometer, Valentini (2006) concluded that the image of the EU in terms of trust towards the European Parliament and the European Commission had declined in the period between Spring 2002 and Autumn 2005.

² Following Freeman's definition, a stakeholder consists of any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives (Key, 1999). According to Mitchell et al. (1997), persons, groups, neighbourhoods, organisations, institutions, societies, and even the natural environment are thought to qualify as actual or potential stakeholders.

are young people in Finland familiar with and utilising such online communication tools and citizen blogs to discuss EU policy matters? Online communication and the EU Public communication is in part considered synonymous with mass communication, although it also includes other forms of interaction with public groups (Vos & Schoemaker, 2005). Mass communication here means any communication produced by a single source which is capable of being transmitted to an infinitely large audience (Fearing, 1954). Nowadays the Internet is an extremely complex network of thousands of geographically dispersed networks, including more than 100,000 individual computer networks owned by governments, corporations, universities, non-profit groups and others (K.-Kakabadse et al., 2000). According to this, the Internet clearly represents a mass communication vehicle. In recent years private and public organisations have discovered opportunities of using Internet and online communication tools to reach various publics. As Gerbner (1967) states, the new media of communication provide new ways of selecting, composing, and sharing perspectives. New institutions of communication create new publics across boundaries of time, space, and status.

Internet and online communication also offer possibilities to the EU and its citizens to engage in two-way communication, in a way that was not possible in previous decades. First of all, online communication provides the EU opportunities to circulate topical information to multiple stakeholders and engage them in an interactive dialogue (Gill et al., 2008). When discussing interactive communication media, Markus considers:

An interactive medium as a vehicle that enables and constrains multidirectional communication flows among the members of a social unit with two or more members. (1987: 492)

He refers to, for example, telephone, paper mail, electronic mail, voicemail and computer conferencing. Online communication tools are used as interactive media between an organisation and its stakeholders, since they facilitate two-way communication and enable mutual feedback, response and adaptation (Leichty & Esrock, 2001). Secondly, online tools allow the EU to strengthen its ties with Member States. As a supranational organisation, in fact, the EU's communication is partially organised via its Member States, as well as directly to its citizens. Gupta and Govindarajan (1991) stated that multinational organisations should utilise the cooperation of headquarters with local subsidiaries. Similarly, national level organisations, such as EU information offices, may have a role in designing communication processes. In addition to nationally or locally supported communication, direct communication with citizens in Member States is also utilised. For this purpose online communication tools are very suitable, because the Web does not have geographic boundaries. The EU benefits from online communication when it comes to cross-border communication, because citizens in various regions may be reached via these channels. Thirdly, the Web provides opportunities to communicate at home with people from other places at any time. Among all the opportunities offered by the Web, citizen blogs have become especially popular. A blog is defined as a journal that is written and maintained online, on the Internet; it is frequently updated and open for the public to read, while individuals can post entries without much difficulty (Taricani, 2007). Interaction can be said to be the essence of blogs, as the discussion between bloggers and readers makes the blog a two-way communication tool.

Online communication tools clearly represent a strategic opportunity for the EU to reach an even wider audience; nevertheless, their implementation could also raise several problems, for instance related to cultural differences of each Member State.

As Hofstede (1993) stated in relation to many international cooperation projects, such experiences are often overturned because intercultural differences of the various parties have not been taken into account well enough. Dervin critically analysed:

As various new communication technologies are introduced, the gaps between the managed and the managers grow larger and those who wish to move in the communication “fast lane” have to sacrifice their uniqueness and cultural diversity to do so. (1989: 74)

Gurau (2008) specified that messages need to be adapted to the cultural context of the various public groups. To solve this issue, the EU programmes, aiming at communicating with publics from more than one country, should take into consideration local and cultural priorities by using research to create as much as possible two-way communications with publics (Valentini, 2008).

Correlated with this problem is the fact that online communication tools need to be well-designed in accordance with the needs and values of stakeholders as well as to their specific interactive nature. In fact, the main difference between computer networks and forms of written communication is the interactive nature of the former and the various directions into which information is exchanged (Barnes, 2001). A further problem is related to the authenticity and credibility of the source of information. Chaffee and Metzger state:

Tight control over access to the media by elites and professional gatekeepers is waning, as individuals and organisations with modest means become content selectors and editors in their own right. (2001: 370)

So it needs to be clear for what purposes the EU wants to utilise two-way communication and how this can serve stakeholders' expectations. Moreover, simply knowing stakeholders' communication needs is not enough: their online behaviour needs to be studied as well, including the willingness to engage in a two-way dialogue with the EU. Not all people, in fact, are interested in engaging in such communications. Some are indifferent to it, although they may have the same potential exposure to sent information, and these uninterested groups may require totally different communication strategies and tactics (Mendelsohn, 1973). People's interests will create selective exposure, as many scholars have stated (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947; Fearing, 1954; Stiff & Mongeau, 2003), because people are interested in content which is in line with their previous beliefs, attitudes and understanding of the world. Ferguson (1999) explained that people attend to messages that appear close at hand, personally relevant, and important to their lives in physical and psychological terms. They make unconscious decisions about which kind of information they expose themselves to. Selective exposure is even more influential in online environments: unlike most traditional media texts, in fact, researchers cannot assume that because two people visited the same website, they were exposed to the same content (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Organisations like the EU should be aware of the needs and interests of different public groups when designing communication means. For the EU a strong Web content would not be enough; it also has to attract users.

Finally, when an organisation is not able to follow online discussions, some stakeholders may be left without possibilities to influence the organisation's policies. In this situation,

organisations may not fulfil all their responsibilities towards each primary stakeholder to an equal extent, especially when a stakeholder uses online tools for communicating with organisations. By carrying out economic and non-economic responsibilities only to some primary stakeholders, in the long run organisations will meet responsibilities relative to each stakeholder to unequal extents (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001). Because stakeholders do not have all the same importance for organisations, Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest a way to prioritise organisations' attention towards their stakeholders through three main attributes: power, legitimacy and urgency. Given that the EU has multiple stakeholders, similar stakeholder analyses should be conducted to further identify EU primary stakeholders.

According to the EU's Plan D (CEC, 2005, 2006b), young citizens hold a unique position in the stakeholder map. Plan D in fact states that special attention should be given to communication with the youth, since this would raise awareness for European integration and help young people to better understand the EU. Online tools may be an efficient means of reaching younger Europeans; therefore the EU should monitor blog discussions related to policies, as this clarifies stakeholder opinions. These opinions may not be heard otherwise and would therefore leave those stakeholders without a voice. Monitoring the discussions on blogs can be seen as a responsibility of the organisation towards its young citizens.

Particularly, online communication tools and online campaigns have potential to be successful in reaching younger target audiences, especially in Finland, a country with one of the highest levels of internet penetration. Lehtonen (2004) stated that Finnish stakeholders cannot imagine any organisation not having electronic communication means which they can utilise. Thus, online communication tools are highly appreciated and a precondition of a good organisational image. For this purpose, Dervin suggests:

Find ways to make the campaign's prescribed actions real to the individual, and buy as much redundancy as you can afford.... Get the media gatekeepers on the campaign's side to get the boost of media hype and incorporate networking and community-based programmes as part of the campaign. (1989: 68)

Youth are known to be more familiar with online communication means compared to older groups of people. Since research has not yet been conducted on the Finnish youth's online behaviour towards the EU's online communications, this particular young group was chosen for the study. Eventually, the results will provide new information about the Finnish youth's online behaviour and opinions about the EU organisational level.

Research design and methodology

To investigate the use of EU-related blogs and the EU's own communication means, we conducted a study among Finnish young people, mainly students, of twenty to thirty years old. This included an online survey and follow-up interviews. Invitations to take part in the study were sent via email to various email lists in Finland and recipients were asked to take part in the study. Thirty-nine respondents answered to an online survey with questions about their use of online communication. The survey questions were designed to reveal the focus group's everyday use of the Internet, online communication tools in general, as well as their opinions about the EU as an organisation.

After this, follow-up interviews were done with the same respondents to get more detailed information. Questions were asked about how the EU should reach the younger groups in Finland and whether the respondents would be interested in a two-way dialogue with the EU. Respondents were invited to visit EU online communication tools, and to comment on these in a separate online survey. In addition, a content analysis of six EU-related blogs was conducted over three months (see Table 1). The citizen blog discussion was monitored and analysed in order to see how the independent blogs were utilised and if the Finnish youth group was active online, showing an interest in the independent blogs.

The blogs were chosen randomly via searching on online blog lists using Google search. A first criterion in selecting Finnish blogs was that they had to be maintained by a Finn, to ensure a Finnish point of view. A second criterion was that the blog content had to be about the EU and possibly other political and social issues. The final criterion was that various sides of political arena had to be covered to ensure objective analysis and presentation of ideology. The latter selection was done by studying the tone of voice in the blog, and searching for clear statements made by the bloggers referring to active participation in a political party. The international blogs were chosen to show some international aspects of independent European blogging on EU matters. One blog was chosen randomly from Germany as well as the UK, to represent an English- language blog. Another blog was an all-European blog portal, which included multiple blogs, ensuring international input.

Table 1. Overview of the studied EU online communication means and citizen blogs

EU Online communication portals	EuroparlTV	http://www.europarltv.europa.eu/
	Debate Europe	http://europa.eu/debateeurope/index_fi.htm
	EUTube	http://www.youtube.com/eutube
	EuropeGo	http://europa.eu/europago/welcome.jsp
Finnish blogs	Anna Mikkolan blogi	http://annamikkola.wordpress.com/
	Eurooppanuoret blogi	http://www.eurooppanuoret.fi/blogi.html
	Politiikkaa ja polemiikka	http://ninasuomalainen.wordpress.com/
International blogs	Nosemonkey's EUtopia	http://www.jcm.org.uk/blog/
	Blogactiv	http://english.blogactiv.eu/
	Julien Frisch—Watching Europe	http://julienfrisch.blogspot.com/

Table 2. Age Distribution of respondents

Age in Years	%
20	6
21	9
22	12
23	17
24	12
25	14
26	9
27	6
28	9
29	6
20-30	(n=39) 100

Results

As Table 2 shows, the age diversity among the respondents was large and provided a good sample of the opinions of the age group of twenty- to thirty-year-olds. Figure 1 below shows how many hours the respondents were online on a daily basis. For most of the respondents this was three to four hours a day.

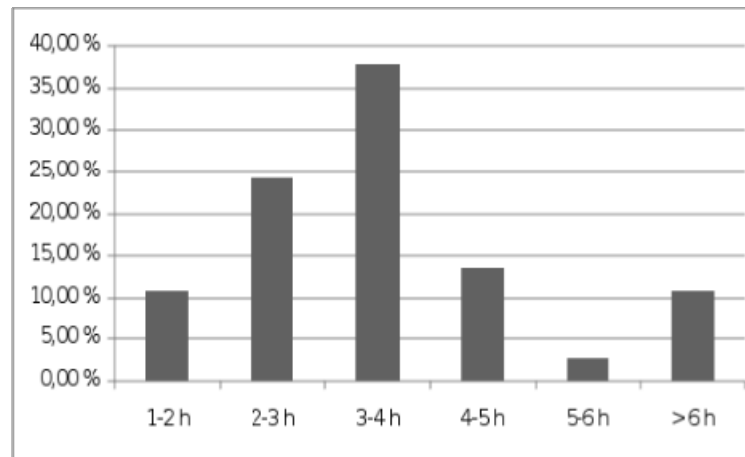


Figure 1. Internet use in hours per day

The respondents were familiar with blogs in general. Ninety-two percent of the youth utilises blogs, as presented in Figure 9.2 below. However, 82 percent of the respondents had never seen an EU online communication tool. According to the answers, many respondents were not aware of the EU's own online communication tools, and did not know that there may be interesting information freely available. Others didn't know where to start looking for certain information about the EU, and preferred to use search engines like Google rather than directly looking for EU Web pages and ending up in navigation problems. One respondent expected that the language in the EU's online communication tools would most likely be too complicated to understand, therefore there seemed no point in visiting these. Wikipedia was considered a more suitable source for information, as it provides information in a better format than expected in EU's online communication tools. Those among the 92 percent of the respondents that frequented online blogs were mostly interested in blogs related to fashion, travel, nature and well-known people. However, a small number of respondents did visit citizen blogs that provide EU-related content. Thus we can assume that the young respondents, at least to some extent, were interested in EU-related blogs.

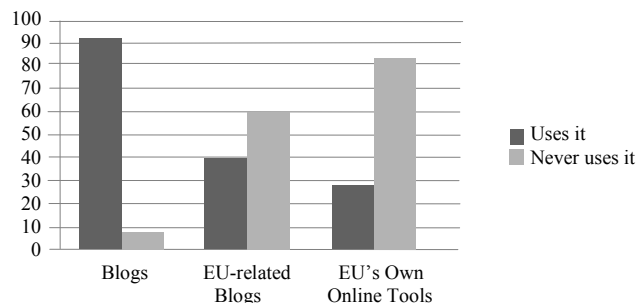


Figure 2. Use of online communication tools.

To the question “what additional information would you like to receive from the EU through its online communication means?”, 71 percent responded that they would be interested in news and background information on EU policies, decisions and regulations (see Table 13.3). Information on other Member States was also desired, as well as background and discussion. In addition the EU's expansion and development projects raised the interest of 46 percent of the respondents.

Table 3. Information preferences about the EU.

Information Type	Percentage
News of policies and projects	71
Background and discussion	57
Links	14
EU's internal governance	29
EU's developments / enlargement	46
Membership state info	37
Other	23

The respondents expressed a wish for higher-quality communication means as well as better structured information, so it would be easier to navigate through the available online information. Of the recipients, 66 percent did not know to what extent the EU has been able to create online communication tools. One respondent mentioned that lack of advertising about EU communication means indicated that most likely there were no online communication means available. Another respondent expressed disappointment in the EU, stating that people may disregard the EU's communication channels because of disappointment about the EU's ability to act in the global political arena.

In addition to the survey, follow-up interviews were conducted with some respondents. These focused on how the respondents felt about online communication means, both the EU's own and citizen blogs. The individual respondents were invited to visit pre-chosen citizen blogs online (see Table 13.1), as well as the EU's own online communication tools (Debate Europe, EUTube, EuropeGo and EuroparlTV). Subsequently the interviewees were asked to answer an additional questionnaire. Firstly, the citizen blogs were addressed. Seventy-five percent of the group members had not visited the particular blogs before. Some respondents said that they did not find the layout of the blogs attractive. Those that felt the content was informative also appreciated the layout and bright colours of the websites more. Secondly, the EU's own online communication tools were discussed (see Table 13.4). One-third of interviewees felt that the tools were useful; the same number as those that were hesitant about this, or didn't know. Sixty-seven percent of the youth felt that maybe they can have a dialogue with EU's actors via online communication means, while the others believed that there is no possibility for two-way communication.

Table 4. Opinions about EU communication means

	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	Don't Know (%)	No (%)
Do you feel that the EU's communication tools are useful?	33	33	33	0
Do you feel that you can have a dialogue with the EU's actors?	0	67	0	33
Do you think you will visit the EU's online communication tools again?	75	0	25	0

Seventy-five percent of the interviewees stated that they expected to visit the EU's e-communication tools again another time. Reasons mentioned for the additional visit were particularly the informative content of EUTube. Twenty-five percent of the respondents said they would not expect to visit the online communication tools again. Some interviewees stated that part of the independent blogs had good quality, so that it couldn't be difficult for a large organisation like the EU to also provide good e-tools. Better navigation would help respondents to find the kind of information that they were looking for on the EU's online communication channels, instead of being stuck in what was considered less relevant information.

The content analysis of blogs revealed that bloggers work either in groups or as individuals. Finnish and foreign blogs were studied from various sides of the political spectrum (see Table 13.1). The visitors are invited to comment on the content, but in all blogs investigated, they cannot post actual blog content as such, merely comments and ideas. For instance, on EUTube only particular members of the organisation have access to post content on the site, while on EUDebate individuals can post comments and ideas. Bloggers apparently take strong stands either for or against the EU and its activities. The most discussed topics during the three-month observation period in the summer of 2008 were the expansion of the EU, the Lisbon Treaty, climate change and EU politics towards Russia and Georgia. All of the bloggers, both Finns and foreigners, presented official statements from EU to support their views, as well as reports and documents from third-party sources to justify their stands on various issues. Bloggers phrased comments in a rather objective way, although in some issues the political preferences of the writer seemed obvious. The monitored blogs were mostly updated weekly; for some blogs this was twice a week. In most blogs, colours and layout have received much attention in the design, while some blogs emphasise content rather than the style of the site.

Discussion and conclusions

Online communication means have become a reality to the younger generation in the late twentieth century. They are nowadays as common channels to the youth, as were TV, radio and newspapers to the previous generation. Nowadays we are virtually broadcasting through the ubiquitous platform of the Internet (Taricani, 2007). Therefore, online communications are particularly important as well as challenging for any type of organisation, including EU institutions. The study presented in this chapter shows some preliminary insights on the impact of EU online communications among young Finns. Although in a limited way, this study shows that the Finnish youth is familiar with the Internet and online blogs, since the Internet is used three to four hours a day, but lacks knowledge concerning the EU and its communication means.

In general young Finns associate the EU with positive aspects like freedom of movement. Also, the Euro currency was mentioned positively in the questionnaire and during the follow-up interviews. However, the respondents felt that the EU is a large, complicated and bureaucratic organisation which is very difficult to approach and communicate with. The investigation also revealed that young Finns are interested in the EU. They are aware of basic facts about the EU and what it stands for, but the role of the EU in their everyday life in Finland is not clear to them. Sometimes assumptions seem like reality in the absence of profound knowledge. Those data are indeed congruous with Eurobarometer polls. The Eurobarometer (EB, 2005) showed that 64

percent of European twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds felt somehow attached to Europe. According to the Eurobarometer survey among youth of fifteen to thirty years old (EB, 2007), 40 percent of the age group regards the EU as being too bureaucratic and a waste of time and money. Thus it can be argued that, although the youth feel connected to the EU as a group of nations, the organisation's functions and work is not known, and thus the image of the EU as a bureaucratic organisation is widely accepted as a reality.

In relation to EU online communications, the respondents of the study do not have a good overview of its activities. Consequently, if the EU wishes to increase the flow of communication with Finnish youth, it should make itself appear on a human scale. For the interviewees, two-way communication with the EU and its actors, for example, with a member of the European Commission, seemed unrealistic because of differences in hierarchical position, knowledge and language problems. Some suggested that such two-way communication is rather a symbolic act and that it cannot be trusted to be more than that. Furthermore, facilitating information retrieval and navigation are points of attention. For this, Caldas (2008) pointed out that Google is the most-used search engine among researchers. In our study we came across the same trend, as Finnish youngsters would rather use tools like Google than take their time with EU's communication means directly. The interviewees found it difficult to locate information in the EU's Web sources and this makes them more inclined to use other sources like Wikipedia. Speed and effectiveness seem to be the key issues.

According to Ungerer (2000), access to the new communications structures in the Internet is of fundamental importance. Therefore, the EU needs to continue the development process of online communication channels that have the capacity of reaching youth in Finland like in the other EU Member States. The opportunity for the EU is to create good-quality communication tools which can be navigated easily, and to create a buzz over EU's communication channels among the young groups. The EU has just seen online communication means as a possibility to connect better to young people, but has not yet exploited its advantages fully. In order to create relations with the youth, the EU needs to investigate their needs and interests. National and local institutions need to be involved in the design and utilisation process, to make sure that cultural differences are taken into account. Valentini (2007) argued that citizen participation in EU affairs and trust in its institutions is not only dependent on citizens' motivation and desire to intervene in supranational political affairs but also on citizens' knowledge of policies and the decision-making process. These issues can be addressed in the EU's communication tools. In our study almost all of the respondents also wished for online communication tools in their native language. The full utilisation of the online communication channels as a tool for a direct communication between the two parties needs investment in resources. But, as the General Director of the DG Communication C. Sørensen stated, a lack of human resources and funding still prevents the EU's full utilisation of online communication channels as a tool for a direct communication with citizens.³

New media create new challenges for the EU as well. As Boudreau et al. (1998) argued, an international approach calls for a more horizontal structure and established strategic linkages between the various countries in which an organisation operates, and therefore the costs of online communication means are higher for a multinational organisation and coordination is more complex. Thus, organisations such as the EU need a well-coordinated structure when designing

³ Personal interview, July 11, 2008.

and using online communication tools. Research is needed to better understand how different groups utilise online networks and how the online world changes the field of mass communication. As Chaffee and Metzger (2001) explained, new media seriously challenge the core assumptions of traditional empirical and critical mass communication research.

Next to improved EU online communication tools, independent citizen blogs will also remain useful to express and hear about people's opinions. There are no editors online: the Internet offers large audiences and one has unlimited access (Taricani, 2007). As Barnes (2001) mentioned, groups that normally would not come together in a physical space can meet safely in cyberspace. The content analysis showed that blogs are popular enough to attract visitors, even when visitors can only place comments on the site, reacting to bloggers, rather than posting main content themselves. Individual blogs might be the space to express disappointment towards EU-related issues, as they may be preferred to giving direct feedback on official platforms; hence citizen blogs which have no evident connection to the EU are an important platform, also for the EU to monitor opinions and to stay informed about citizen's feelings. Although the EU's policy issues are being discussed in online citizen blogs, according to our study, this does not constitute a two-way communication with the EU at the present time. More is needed in order to open a dialogue with young citizens, if the engagement of the youth of today is a prerequisite for the future development of the EU. This requires carefully developed, high-quality communication tools as well as willingness on behalf of the EU to listen to and understand young citizens.

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