The European Commission's E–Government Initiatives and Public Participation

E

Christian Hunold
Drexel University, USA

INTRODUCTION

According to the European Commission (2003), increased networking of local, regional, and national administrations across the European Union (EU) is creating "a more integrated 'European public space' for EU citizens and businesses" (p. 6). This emerging public space owes its existence chiefly to improvements in information and communication technology (ICT). The Commission (2002) believes that e-government initiatives will help to build a more robust European public space capable of engendering in the public's mind a sense of democratic ownership of European institutions and policies: "E-government is helping to establish a more open, inclusive and productive public sector, in line with good governance" (p. 7). E-government as defined by the Commission (2005) as "the use of information and communication technologies, combined with organisational change and new skills, to improve public services, increase democratic participation and enhance public policy making."

Echoing the literature on e-democracy (Gibson, Rommele, & Ward, 2004), the Commission (2002) contends that e-government can improve EU democratic processes and public support for EU policies in two ways: by giving citizens greater access to information from authorities, which empowers citizens by improving the transparency and accountability of European institutions; and by fostering direct communication between citizens and policy makers, which enables improved mutual accommodation of needs and interests. This article analyzes Commission e-government initiatives, with special emphasis on the Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society (CONECCS) directory, the interactive policy making (IPM) initiative, and the i2010: European Information Society 2010 initiative. IPM seeks to enable the Commission to collect feedback directly from citizens, consumers, and businesses via a single Internet access point for consultations (Your Voice in Europe). i2010 is a five-year strategy launched in 2005 to boost Europe's digital economy and includes proposals to enhance e-participation in Europe's emerging public space. Such proposals, I argue, will be more likely to succeed if the Commission were to move from managerial and con-sultative to participatory models of public involvement (Chadwick & May, 2003).

BACKGROUND

Interest group involvement in shaping Commission decisions is common and largely routine. Interest group participation can make the difference between the Commission's success and failure in the policy process (Greenwood, 1997); public consultations build cooperation around and support for its proposals and policies (Bellier, 1997). Cultivating close relationships with interest groups helps the Commission gather valuable expertise, though involving a wide range of nongovernmental groups and interests in deliberations about new policy initiatives may also help the Commission avoid obstruction by national governments (Christiansen, 1996). As Schmitter (2000) notes, however, opportunities for access to European interest representation are far from equal: "While all this pluralism (to use the American expression) is entirely appropriate in a modem democracy, its highly skewed nature does raise some questions about whether these channels for the expression of particular intensities are freely and fairly available to all citizens of Europe. So far, the evidence suggests a mobilization of bias in favor of business interests" (p. 81). Also concerned about too much backroom dealing with privileged interest groups, Watson and Shackleton (2003) call for "a more open policy debate in which more voices are heard by EU policy-makers" (p. 106).

The Commission is increasingly sensitive to these concerns. The Prodi Commission's 2001 *White Paper on European Governance* acknowledged the Commission's duty to broaden public involvement in its policy deliberations. From the Commission's perspective the problem was not that European citizens did not speak up, but that they often did so in ways the Commission could not easily understand or integrate into policy decisions. Europe's unruly public sphere often failed to produce the sort of policy-relevant communication the Commission saw as essential to make Brussels less remote to European citizens. ICTs took center stage in subsequent proposals to

create a "reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue" with civil society organizations (European Commission, 2002). Moving consultations online, the Commission hoped, would improve their transparency and lower barriers to access for groups new to the European policy arena. Since taking office in late 2004, the Barroso Commission has expanded on these efforts by unleashing a slew of new e-government initiatives seen as critical to reviving Europe's economy and furthering European citizenship. According to Commissioner for Information Society and Media Viviane Reding (2004), "Information technologies encourage participation, facilitate access to information and offer new ways of learning and communicating." As well as meeting public demand for participation in European policy making, the Commission views enhancing e-government and, more broadly, nurturing a European information society, as important factors in their own right in promoting economic growth across the European Union.

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Consultation, the European Commission, and Civil Society

CONECCS (Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society) is an online directory of the Commission's formal civil society consultative bodies and of civil society organizations representing a wide range of groups and interests. CONECCS can be accessed via the Commission's civil society Web site, which provides information on the Commission's dialogue and consultations with civil society. On December 2, 2005, the directory listed 738 organizations, including "third-sector" nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as business federations, labor unions, and associations of governmental authorities. Registration in CONECCS is voluntary and does not confer accreditation on groups (http://europa.eu.int/comm/civil_society/coneccs/index_en.htm). The Commission hopes CONECCS will improve the openness and accountability of its policy deliberations and decisions. The directory is part of the Commission's efforts to convey to the public what issues are being developed, what mechanisms are being used to consult, who is being consulted and why, and what has influenced decisions in the formulation of policy.

Organizations wishing to participate in Commission consultations must provide the Commission and the public at large with basic information about themselves, preferably via CONECCS. As participation in CONECCS is voluntary, however, groups may provide this information

in other ways, such as "special information sheets" (European Commission, 2002). As a practical matter, though, CONECCS is fairly inclusive; organizations may be searched for alphabetically or by policy area, which provides interested citizens with a convenient means of identifying and contacting civil society organizations that participate in a wide range of EU policy consultations. Technological convenience alone, however, will not solve the underlying problem for enhancing public participation and inclusion, namely that European-level associations do not play a significant role in the lives of most Europeans. Initiatives such as CONECCS are a start, but they cannot conjure by themselves a European public space where there may not be enough European-level public engagement to begin with.

Interactive Policy Making

The interactive policy making (IPM) initiative consists of two online instruments that enable the Commission to gather feedback directly from citizens, consumers, and businesses in order to better understand how they perceive Commission policies and to learn from their experience, with a view to shaping new policies and improving existing ones (European Commission, 2005a). Both instruments are available via the Your Voice in Europe Web portal, which was developed in the context of IPM and is the Commission's single access point for consultations.

A *feedback mechanism* helps the Commission collect information from citizens and businesses about their daily problems relating to different EU policies. About 300 intermediaries, such as Euro Info Centers and European Consumers Centers located across the EU, candidate countries, and European Free Trade Area countries, collect everyday problems and record them in the Commission's feedback database. This listening device allows for a constant monitoring of the application of existing legislation and provides concrete input for new policy initiatives. The Commission claims that thousands of cases are collected annually, providing several Directorate Generals with input for policy making (European Commission, 2005a).

An *online consultation mechanism* involves structured questionnaires, which citizens may answer on the Internet in order to provide the Commission with feedback on particular policy issues. As this mechanism can handle structured questions in several languages and deliver the output in the desired language, the Commission should be able to act on citizens' opinions and views more quickly and effectively than in the days of paper-based consultations. For example, a consultation in preparation for the Community Action Plan on Animal Welfare and Protection (closing date December 11, 2005) involved an 18-point questionnaire soliciting responses to various ani-

3 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/european-commission-government-initiatives-public/11590

Related Content

Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) Implementation in a Developing World Context: Case of Botswana

Mosweu Olefhile, Mutshewa Athulangand Kelvin Joseph Bwalya (2014). *Digital Access and E-Government: Perspectives from Developing and Emerging Countries (pp. 235-252).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/electronic-document-and-records-management-system-edrms-implementation-in-a-developing-world-context/107175

An E-Government Strategic Planning Framework

Vedmani Sharan (2011). *Stakeholder Adoption of E-Government Services: Driving and Resisting Factors (pp. 14-26).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/government-strategic-planning-framework/54119

Ubiquitous Participation Platform for POLicy Makings (UbiPOL): A Research Note

Zahir Irani, Habin Lee, Vishanth Weerakkody, Muhammad Kamaland Shaun Topham (2010). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 78-106).*

www.irma-international.org/article/ubiquitous-participation-platform-policy-makings/38965

Evaluating Electronic Health Records Systems in Jordan Extending EUCS With Self-Efficacy

Ali Odeh Aljaafreh (2020). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 1-18).*

www.irma-international.org/article/evaluating-electronic-health-records-systems-in-jordan-extending-eucs-with-self-efficacy/267137

Co-Creating Public Value in E-Government: A Case Study of Korean Municipal Government Websites

Seulki Lee-Geillerand Taejun (David) Lee (2019). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 19-36).*

www.irma-international.org/article/co-creating-public-value-in-e-government/257488