The EU's Use of the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has been one of the leading lights concerning Internet use in dealing with other public administrations and citizens. This article will argue that e-government has meant that the European Commission has been able to promote a virtual arena for pan-European activity, which has promoted action at the national and local levels in the EU.

In the first instance, this article will deal with how the European Commission uses the Internet to attempt to improve its own relationship with both national public administrations and citizens in terms of the European policy-making process. Although the Internet is perceived as aiding public administrations in information and service provision, which helps to deliver better governance from an institutional governance perspective, a focus on this would only tell one half of the story. Increasing democratic participation and regaining trust in the political system at large is also an important issue for public bodies such as the European Commission to address, and this is not merely a technical process. These technical (efficiency, etc.) and democratic stages are two key parts in the process of developing an information and communication technology (ICT)-based governance agenda in the EU.

In order to outline the process, this article deals with four different aspects of the European Commission's e-policies. It makes reference to the following:

1. The Commission's information provision, through the EU's Europa (II) Web server;
2. The way in which the Commission has tried to interact with citizens, using interactive policy making (IPM);
3. The e Commission initiative; and
4. The way in which the Commission links member-state public administrations together, through the IDA(BC) programme.

This article reveals the increasing coherence of the European Commission's approach to using the Internet in institutional affairs. Although the Commission's approach to using the Internet for governance was initially unstable and ad hoc, by the turn of the century, all efforts had converged around the political issues of institutional reform and better governance. This has been further enhanced by the application of the open method of coordination as one of the tools of EU governance, which has enabled the Commission to take a more informal role in implementing e-government strategies at the pan-European level.

This article does not attempt to define e-government at the European level nor does it go into policy areas concerning e-government (such as research, socioeconomic inclusion, improving competitiveness, or specific e-government policy developed by the European Commission), but will contribute to a greater understanding of how the EU itself has used the Internet to promote an e-government agenda that is affecting all public administrations.

BACKGROUND

Digital technologies, as exemplified by the Internet—simply a network of digital data networks—are redefining the landscape upon which actors play their roles in most economic, social, and political spheres. Communication channels such as the Internet provide for dissemination of information and knowledge, thereby enabling innovation to take place over networks as most innovation is now non-physical. According to David Johnston (1998), "we are moving to a society in which the management of information—through communications and computer networks—is becoming the key strategic resource that determines the competitiveness of nations and communities."

Johnson and Post (1998) question "whether a governance system divided into territories demarcated by physical boundaries can simultaneously serve the two key governmental goals of legitimacy and efficiency." Raising the question leads to the conclusion that new actors such as the EU, which is geographically broad, are introduced into the governance matrix. Economic efficiency becomes far more important than geography, and when combined with a high level of institutional legitimacy, new governance paradigms can emerge. ICTs have been perceived as opportunities to improve both efficiency and public value. The EU emerges as one of those actors that can be

seen to develop its legitimacy and efficiency through the use of the Internet.

From this perspective, the EU is provided with a whole range of opportunities concerning its use of the Internet. These opportunities, however, can also be considered as challenges for the structure of the EU and its components. The following five sections outline how the European Commission deals with these challenges and opportunities.

TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTING AN E-GOVERNMENT AGENDA IN THE EU

Information: Europa and Europa II

At the EU level, where much is made of the role of the "information deficit" as a central problem that subsequently causes the perceived democratic deficit, much use can be derived from this characteristic of the Internet to promote an enhanced standing of the EU. At a basic level, this is carried out by the development of a Web site that contains information (European Commission, 2004). In more advanced stages, this involves the creation of databases that can be used by individuals and organisations to find out more information about a particular issue. The first step was undertaken by the European Commission in 1995, with the development of the Europa Web site.

From the perspective of the European Commission, the target audience of its communication strategy has always been a concern: the typical user has been defined by European political priorities, such as catering for people on the move. The provision of information for the average citizen was not made a priority, which reveals a certain approach toward the person on the street, whom it is considered would not be interested in the EU's institutions. This position has evolved since 1995.

Table 1. Pace setters in the European Commission for Web-based activity (European Commission, Informatics Directorate, 2001)

Thematic Portals
Information Society
Environment
Research
The EU in the World
Audience-Based Portals
Virtual Press Office
Dialogue With Citizens
Dialogue With Business and Business Networks
Service-Based Portals
EU Law
EU Administrations
Statistics
Publications
Libraries
Recruitment

The Europa Web site and the .eu.int domain are the central point of reference for all the EU's institutions: sites that predated Europa were gradually brought into this domain in order to present a coherent approach to the Commission's (and the Union's) digital presence. Cordis (Community Research and Development Information Service) and ISPO (Information Society Promotion Office) were the two big sites that had been created outside the .eu.int domain (www.cordis.lu and www.ispo.cec.be, respectively). The site can be divided into subdomains: there are about 140 important subsites under the common denominator europa.eu.int. Europa is managed and maintained by a staff of 90 people: 30 are in the Commission, and the remainder are provided by a contracted company. This team of 90 staff also work on SCADplus, which provides information leaflets regarding EU activity areas and policies. The staff of 90 does not include those working in other directorate generals (DGs) on content for the various sites of each DG in the European Commission. Other EU institutions make use of the Commission's Europa site too. When Europa was launched by the Commission, other EU institutions subsequently asked the Commission to coordinate the entire EU's Web presence.

Europa II is based on a set of thematic, audience-based, and service-based portals and provides information, allows interactive communication, and provides transaction opportunities for citizens and businesses (European Commission, Informatics Direct, 2001, pp. 7-9). Plans to create thematic portals for various areas, including the Information Society, were elaborated in 2001.

Table 1 shows which sites had already been put in place by 2001, which the Commission considered pace setters for other Web-based activity. Each activity is the responsibility of a different DG, and some are worked on by several DGs in collaboration.

The portal sites are generally decided upon by all the EU institutions, with the Commission making a proposal and the Council agreeing, although sometimes, the Council requests that the Commission investigates possibilities for portals. Given the levels of integration that is required for these portals, both horizontally and vertically, it is necessary to have the support of all levels of public administration—national and European—in their creation. EURES—a European CV-hosting portal, for example, is supported by the IDA programme.

DG Press, which holds the chair for meetings of the Europa II Steering Committee, works together with 10 other services in the Commission that are considered to have "crucial responsibility in the field of web communication and information" (European Commission, Information and Communication Support, 2001, p. 19). Because responsibility for each DG's Web site is left to the respective DG, a forum has been created to ensure that all Web pages are compliant with common rules (European Com-

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