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Internet in the European Union's communication policy

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Internet, European Union, European Commission, communication policy, history

ABSTRACT

The Internet is becoming the most important medium in the communication policy of the European Union. Over the past 15 years, it has caused significant changes in the methods of informing citizens of member states and made critical changes in the information distribution and archival policy of the EU, allowing access to huge quantities of data for all interested. It enabled an efficient implementation of the openness and transparency policy, and contributes to changing traditional communication procedures of EU officials and politicians. Nevertheless, the use of the Internet remains a challenge in initiating dialogue with EU citizens. This also highlighted problems with organizing the collection of information, archiving and making it available in many languages.

The communication policy of the European Union (EU) is currently based on the communication from the Commission from 2007 entitled *Communicating Europe in partnership*¹. The main purpose of this policy is providing EU citizens with access to information and understanding the outcomes of EU policies. The most important institution responsible for achieving this goal is the European Commission, but many of its information activities are done in cooperation with other institutions. For 15 years, one of its main tools has been the Internet. The article herein presents in what way this new medium influenced the shape of EU communication policy, especially in comparison with traditional media. The changes in dissemination and archival policies have been presented, and also accessing EU databases and audiovisual materials. Examined was the use of the Internet in the policies of openness and transparency of the organization, as well as its strategy of using Web 2.0 tools.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. *Communicating Europe in Partnership*, Brussels, 3.10.2007, p. 4, COM(2007) 568.

Internet and traditional media in the European Union

The Internet plays a very important part in EU communication policy, as in the last few years it has developed into a serious rival of television, radio and the printed press. It is a phenomenon not only in the communication policy of the EU, but also in the media system of the entire world. However, its position cannot be considered without the existence of traditional media. In the case of the EU, changes caused by the spread of this global network are all the more important, as their contact with “old” mass media has hardly been a success. For many decades now, the European Union has experienced a deficit of presence in the national media of member states, which are the most popular with viewers, listeners and readers.

From the beginning of the 1980s the Eurobarometer, surveying public opinion in European Union member states, has researched the use of media in obtaining information on the Communities and the European Union. For many years, survey results showed that in every country, the main sources of information on the EU have been television, daily press and radio². In 1998, the Internet appeared on the list and in the following years, moved up to take fourth place in 2006, and came in third in 2007, before the radio, but still after television and daily press³.

The latest Eurobarometer research from 2011⁴ confirms third place for the Internet among the most popular medium in the EU. 45 per cent of those surveyed claimed that they use the Internet daily or almost every day, 18 per cent – a few times a week, and another 6 per cent – a few times a month. However, 23 per cent of respondents claimed they never used the medium, and 8 per cent, said they did not have access to the Internet. The same research proves that less and less young people (aged 15–24) watch television, but instead more commonly than in other age groups, they use the Internet⁵.

Television is still the main source of information on the EU⁶. It is also the largest medium in terms of searching for information about this organization, although in this case its

² *Les sources d'information sur les problèmes de la Communauté européenne. Les sources d'information sur les problèmes de la Communauté suivant le sentiment d'être bien ou mal informé*, “Euro-baromètre” No. 13 (1980), p. 41, 43; *Sources of information on the problems of the European Community*, “Euro-baromètre” No. 17 (1982), p. 57; *Sources d'information sur la CE*, “Eurobaromètre” No. 39 (1993), p. A31; *The need for more information. The information sources*, “Eurobarometer” No. 49 (1998), p. 7, 10, 15.

³ *Where do people look for information about the EU*, “Eurobarometer” 50 (1998), p. 91; *Sources of information about the European Union*, “Standard Eurobarometer” No. 65 (2006), p. 113, No. 67 (2007), p. 134.

⁴ *The use of media in general*, “Standard Eurobarometer. Information on European Political Matters” No. 74 (2011), p. 16.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17–18.

⁶ *Media vehicles for information on European political matters*, “Standard Eurobarometer. Information on European Political Matters” No. 74 (2011), p. 21.

position in the last few years (2007–2010) has been diminishing, similarly to other traditional media in this area. In recent years only the Internet has gained meaning⁷. It should also be noted that the number of people using the Internet in search of information on the EU is not the same in all member states. In some countries, the Internet already now dominates (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Estonia) in this field over television⁸.

The decade long domination of traditional media in informing on the EU does not however mean that the degree of saturation with information on European integration is, in these very media, sufficient. The Secretariat-General of the European Commission in 2008 regrettably informed that information on the EU in national news amounts to no more than 10 per cent of air time – as much as that devoted to the events in the United States⁹. For 30 years now, the European Commission has been aware of insufficient informing EU citizens on issues of European integration and the difficulty in using national media to implement its information policy¹⁰. Numerous attempts at changing this situation, creating their own television and radio programmes, did not bring on significant change in the situation. The cause of this state is a division of European television viewers, radio listeners and press readers into national groups. In each member state, a different television is watched, radio listened to and press read than in other countries. The popularity of some Pan-European channels (e.g. EuroNews) is not big enough to solve the communication problem of the European Commission, which is intensified by the language barrier and diversity of media traditions (the way of hosting news, type of popular entertainment shows, favorite sports disciplines etc.).

With this background knowledge, the Internet appears to be a new promising medium. Above all, it enables fast and inexpensive access to unlimited amounts of information for a large audience, no matter what their location in Europe or the world. A strong advantage is the possibility of interacting with users. This however does not change the fact that some of the problems of traditional media also concern the Internet – especially the language problem and difficulties with keeping the attention of users. Many organizations, companies, political parties, governments and individual people try to grab the interest of the Internet community, and so the European Commission too has to compete with them. Yet it seems that even with

⁷ *Preferred media for searching for information on the European Union*, “Standard Eurobarometer. Information on European Political Matters” No. 74 (2011), p. 22.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁹ Communication to the Commission. Communicating Europe through the audiovisual media, [s.l.] 2008, p. 4, SEC(2008) 506/2.

¹⁰ A. Ogonowska, *Polityka informacyjna Wspólnot i Unii Europejskiej w sprawozdaniach za lata 1958–2007. Część I. Lata 1958–1992*, “Studia Europejskie” 2008, No. 4, p. 96.

these limits, using the Internet in EU communication policies creates the possibility of greater success than by means of traditional media.

The history of the Internet in the communication policy of the EU is usually dated as the launch of the website Europa in 1995. As the main information server of the European Union, it has been popular from the very beginning. At first, it posted information on the work of the European Commission, but quickly (1997) remaining institutions followed the Commission, writing about themselves¹¹. Equally fast it turned out, that one website is not enough for such a large organization. In the following years, certain institutions, bodies and agencies created their own servers and became independent from the mediation of the Commission. It has now become a custom that new-found institutions create their own Internet sites, with the purpose of providing information on their work. Today, there are numerous official EU servers, and during the last 15 years they have undergone many changes. In the first years, they developed in the amount of information posted, then through the professionalization of message and lately, e.g. content placed on the Europa site, showing the difference in approach to users. A new trend has been customizing Internet sites for both specialists and beginners in issues connected with European integration. In 2011, the European Parliament, as the first, prepared a set of resources on their Internet server in a mobile version, accessible on e.g. smart phones¹². In the same year, one of the EU directories – Whoiswho – has been prepared in a version for tablets.

The enormous amount of information about the EU available online is a great accomplishment of the organization, but it also causes users some problems. The scattering of information on a separate few dozen sites of each institution does not make it easier for Internet users to find what they need. Moreover, the problem is intensified by the rather unclear rules of translating the content of the servers to the 23 official languages of the European Union. In only a few of many EU institutions, can one be sure that sources on the servers have the same information in all the language versions. In most cases, individual or groups of languages are privileged, and contain the most information. The trouble is that it is not always obvious, which language version is the richest. Most often, it is the English one, but there are cases when it might be e.g. French. Additional mix-ups are caused by the language selector tool on the homepages of the sites. This creates an illusory impression that a

¹¹ *Information and communication activities*, [in:] European Commission, *General report on the activities of the European Union 1997*, Brussels–Luxembourg, 1998, p. 455.

¹² *Parlament w Twojej komórce [EP goes mobile – check it out!]*, [s.l.] 2011, www.europarl.europa.eu/pl/headlines/content/20110907STO26058/html/Parlament-w-Twojej-kom%C3%B3rce [accessed: 14.11.2011].

search is possible in any language. There is usually no mention of a different language version being perhaps more complete. Navigating on EU pages, this fact becomes easily noticeable, but those using search engines in most cases don't know or forget about it.

Internet and publications of the European Union

In the early years, Internet sites had basic information on the work of the EU, and their resources were perceived as modest. The situation drastically changed when it was acknowledged that the Internet is perfect for transferring information products, prepared in a different technique, such as books and periodicals. At first, it only informed about the existence of such publications. One of the first works made available in full by the EU was a series of brochures for teachers and youth¹³. Electronic versions of all EU publications quickly became an alternative way of making these resources available. The popularity of electronic versions led to the domination of this form of distribution, contributing to reducing the circulation of books and periodicals in the printed version¹⁴. A key event in this case was the decision not to charge fees for this type of dissemination¹⁵. It caused significant changes in the distribution policy of the Publications Office of the European Community (now the Publications Office of the European Union), however, it also contributed to the greater popularization of its publications.

Before the expansion of the Internet, a great role in informing member states, and those outside them, was played by EU information centers networks. They most often had works published in a printed form by the Publications Office, and also by the institutions themselves. An example of such a network can be the existing European documentation centres¹⁶. At current, the duty of servicing a large number of people interested in EU issues was partially solved by using the Internet, thus allowing the networked institutions to provide more specialized services.

¹³ *Information and communication activities*, [in:] European Commission, *General report on the activities of the European Union 1996*, Brussels–Luxembourg 1997, p. 251.

¹⁴ The Publications Office of the European Union, in its report for 2004, claims that the value of orders for paid printed publications fell by more than half between the year 1995 and 2004. Cf. Principal indicators of the activity of the Publications Office from 1995 to 2004, [in:] Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, *Annual Management Report 2004*, Luxembourg 2005, p. 15.

¹⁵ *EU Bookshop and dissemination policy*, [in:] Publication Office of the European Union, *Annual Management Report 2010*, Luxembourg 2011, p. 9.

¹⁶ W. Pożniak, *Centra Dokumentacji Europejskiej – sieć informacyjna Komisji Europejskiej*, [in:] *Centra Dokumentacji Europejskiej w Polsce – vademecum*, Warszawa 2009, p. 7–15, http://ec.europa.eu/polska/documents/information/cde_w_polsce_-_vademecum_-_tresc.pdf [accessed: 28.11.2011].

For a very long time, the year 1995 divided the widely accessible works and information from those published before the Internet era. Access to these last ones was perceived as more difficult by users themselves. The situation changed after finishing the digitalization project of the archive sources of the Publications Office of the European Union. In 2009, it was announced that 140 000¹⁷ publications – from those archived (since 1952) to those most recent – are available in a digital format in the EU Bookshop¹⁸. Most of the publications are in pdf format, possible to read by using the free online programme Acrobat Reader. In recent years, publications in other formats have also appeared, such as ePub or mobi, which can be read with the use of e-book readers¹⁹.

An important event in the communication policy of the EU was making the “Official Journal of the European Union” available online in 1998 (in the EUR-Lex system). Series L (legislation) and C (information and notices) were as of then made available. In mid 1999, CE was separated from series C, and intended to be published only in an electronic version online and on CDs, which would reduce the distribution costs of the “Official Journal”. The first success of this enterprise suggested that perhaps in time, it will be possible to resign from the printed version of the entire C series. This however did not happen. At the beginning of the XXI century, some institutions decided to limit the list of documents published in the “Official Journal”, which were previously placed on CE. They did not however return to publishing them in paper, but simply changed their place of distribution online.

The fate of the online version of series L of the “Official Journal” was somewhat different. Due to the fact that its contents are legally binding documents, for a long time only the printed version was accepted as authentic and its electronic equivalent was only an additional information tool. This situation might change in the near future, as the European Commission in April 2011 presented a project, which states that the online version of the “Official Journal” would be recognized as the only authentic version of this publication and at the same time, be a valid source of European law²⁰.

The EUR-Lex system, which provides the “Official Journal”, began archiving it in 1998. Now, a large digitalization project is taking place, which aims at making all the issues

¹⁷ Each language version of the publication was counted separately. Cf. Publication Office of the European Union, *Annual Management Report 2009*, Luxembourg 2010, p. 34.

¹⁸ The digital library of the European Union is available at <http://bookshop.europa.eu>.

¹⁹ For example, the annual report of the European Central Bank for 2010 or publications of the European Environment Agency (www.eea.europa.eu/publications/signals-2011-1) are available in this form.

²⁰ Proposal for a Council regulation on electronic publication of the Official Journal of the European Union, Brussels 2011, COM(2011) 162.

of both series of the periodical available in all official languages²¹. After this, all the most important EU documents will be accessible online.

Internet and European Union databases

The European Commission made their databases available in networks long before the Internet gained countless users. Few groups of users had access to these bases though, which was connected with the problem of accessing dedicated networks in general, and the common practice of charging fees for using them. The World Wide Web opened new possibilities and challenges for EU institutions. Promptly, because already in 1995, attempts were made to use it in accessing databases. The first base made available online was Idea (the current Whoiswho)²², and positive experiences with their experiment contributed to the successful accessing of bases, which were previously closed in EuroBases and Echo services. These include: CELEX, ECLAS, RAPID, SCAD and TED²³. The change in the mode of accessing often required creating a new interface to communicate with the user. Quite quickly it turned out, that the mass user demands simplifying the base and making it user-friendly in order to intuitively discover its possibilities. These new challenges caused some databases to never have an online version, like e.g. OIL, part of which underwent changes, such as merging with ECLAS and SCAD, and CELEX being replaced with EUR-Lex. New bases created with the Internet in mind, were to appear promptly, such as e.g. PreLex and Legislative Observatory.

Similarly as with books and periodicals, there is the problem of paid or free access to EU databases. Free access in case of some data sets has been long discussed, yet it was clearly visible that the necessity to grant free and unlimited access in using the content was the

²¹ *EUR-Lex – work completed in the second half of 2010*, Brussels 2010, documents of the Council of the European Union No. 17428/10 JURINFO 64.

²² *Activities of the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (OOPEC)*, [in:] European Commission, *General report on the activities of the European Union 1995*, Brussels–Luxembourg 1996, p. 254.

²³ Cf. M. Grabowska, *Bazy serwisu EUROBASES*, [in:] *Informacja Unii Europejskiej: informacja drukowana, elektroniczna, audiowizualna, videotex i telewizja satelitarna*, ed. by M. Grabowska, Warszawa 1998, p. 67–70; A. Ogonowska, *Informacja Unii Europejskiej w WWW*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 99–108; eadem, *ECHO – serwis informacyjny Komisji Europejskiej*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 95–97.

prevailing point of view²⁴. Bases which maintained paid access the longest were CELEX and a few other Eurostat statistical sites (up to 2004)²⁵.

Databases organize large amounts of documents, information and data, which the EU operates. These are first and foremost bases, which allow searching legal documents (EUR-Lex), press (RAPID), internal documents of European institutions (document registers) and publications (EU Bookshop). Next are information bases such as PreLex, Legislative Observatory or CORDIS. Without these databases, accessing correct information would be very difficult. Putting information in databases allows for multi-aspect access, without doubt a benefit for users. Unfortunately, in many cases the development in content is not followed by search tools, which would allow selecting from this mass of data that meeting certain criteria. This is connected with the costly problem of developing subject-indexing languages or using modern techniques of full-text search (e.g. operated by Google)²⁶. Right now, it is clearly visible that in the huge collection of information, which is e.g. document registers of the three main EU institutions (The Council of the European Union, European Parliament and European Commission) or the EU Bookshop, the problem is growing and restricting the possibility of using electronic databases.

Accessing audiovisual materials of the European Union online

Increasing the capacity of Internet connections and the possibility to record movies in a digital format made it possible to access online also these EU materials. The first achievement in this field was in 1999 – making European satellite television available online as Europe by Satellite²⁷. An additional benefit of the online version of this television was the fact that its programmes could be watched not just online, as they were transmitted via satellite, but also later on (for about a week). In this way, the EU tried to increase their current presence in local

²⁴ Free access to the CELEX base was demanded by the European Parliament. Cf. European Parliament resolution on the draft general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2003 as modified by the Council (all sections) (11138/2002 – C5-0600/2002 – 2002/2004(BUD)) and Letters of Amendment No. 2/2003 (14847/2002 – C5-0571/2002) and No. 3/2003 (15169/2002 – C5-0595/2002) to the draft general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2003, “Official Journal of the European Union” C31E from 5/02/2004, p. 232–238.

²⁵ *The integrated access to law service*, [in:] Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, *Annual Management Report 2004*, Luxembourg 2005, p. 35; *Free access to all Eurostat data and Publications*, Luxembourg 2004, press release of Eurostat STAT/04/148.

²⁶ Subject indexing languages are artificial languages used in information systems. Their basic function is describing the content of documents and information questions from users of this system. An interesting discussion on the future of these languages can be found in the work of B. Włodarczyk, *Języki informacyjno-wyszukiwawcze – narzędzie „z” czy „bez” przyszłości?*, entry in the blog “Fabryka Języka. Blog Pracowni Języka Haseł Przedmiotowych BN” from 21.06.2011, <http://fabryka-jezyka.bn.org.pl/?p=293> [accessed: 3.11.2011].

²⁷ *Information and communication activities*, [in:] European Commission, *General report on the activities of the European Union 1999*, Brussels–Luxembourg 2000, p. 430.

media, as the main viewers of Europe by Satellite were radio-television stations. An important event in this period was also transmitting press conferences of the European Commission and plenary sessions of the European Parliament. The possibility to watch the work of EU institutions live was an important information tool for journalists, but most of all, it implemented the treaty provisions of openness in the organization.

The fierce development of European audiovisual materials available online became noticeable at the end of the first decade of the XXI century. The European Commission, in its audiovisual strategy, clearly stated that these forms should aim at supplying information in a way that is attractive to users, promotes active European citizenship and contributes to the development of a European public sphere²⁸. An important event of the period is the fact that important European institutions began creating their own multimedia libraries, mainly with broadcasts from their sessions. Because broadcasts alone were a mildly attractive product for individual viewers, audiovisual materials for ordinary citizens were created. A great example is the EUtube channel on YouTube, promoting the activities of the EU in short videos. At the moment, almost every institution and European Union body has their own audiovisual material on its website.

An innovative online information tools are recordings of radio broadcasts, financed by the European Commission in the European radio network Euranet²⁹. These broadcasts are prepared by selected radio stations and aired, also online. The possibility of their play back at a given time significantly improved the efficiency of this tool. A European television was meant to be organized on similar terms, but due to the financial crisis and large financial resources necessary to go through with the investment, the project was discontinued³⁰.

Internet sites and the transparency of European Union activities

Since 1992 and difficulties with ratifying the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has been trying to meet the expectations of its citizens and with greater openness inform on its activities. The Internet was the perfect tool for executing an efficient openness policy. Internet sites, information on the competencies and work of each institution were indeed an improvement in terms of the dissemination policy of former years. Creating two online databases – PreLex by the European Commission and the Legislative Observatory by the European Parliament – was

²⁸ Communication to the Commission. Communicating Europe through audiovisual media, [s.l.] 2008, p. 3, SEC(2008)506/2.

²⁹ Euranet materials are available at www.euranet.eu.

³⁰ Cf. B-Brussels: creation of a European television network to produce and broadcast, on several platforms, regular programmes dedicated to EU affairs in as many official EU languages as possible, and creation of a related Internet portal, "Supplement to the Official Journal of the European Union" 2011/S 19-029214.

aimed at increasing transparency in EU works. Their function is informing on the proceedings of complicated procedures of decision making.

Of breakthrough meaning in this field was passing Regulation No. 1049/2001³¹ on access to documents of the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. It defined so-called systems of direct access, which described what information each institution should place in their full online version³². Primarily, these were legal documents and those connected with the process of decision making. Institutions were also encouraged to electronically publish other documents, especially connected with their policies and strategies. Another form of making documents or at least information about them available, were registers of each institution – these too had to be placed online³³. It should be noticed, that EU institutions rather eagerly use the Internet to publish information on their work, with full versions of their documents and publications, which dismissed them from answering numerous motions on granting access to information. As earlier mentioned, the policy of openness is executed also through providing online access to recorded sessions and debates of European institutions.

However, using Internet servers for storing information carries certain threats. These might be, e.g. temporary access to data, as every few years, servers undergo significant changes. Sometimes a change of high-ranking officials causes whole sites to be recreated (e.g. the European Commission), and some information is deleted. Only in a few cases, old pages are archived or part of the information is moved to the new version of the site. As a result, the site efficiently informs on current activities of the organization, but is not a reliable source of information in the case of older data³⁴. In some cases, data from 5 or 10 years ago is found with difficulty. The lack of an archival strategy for internet pages is inconsistent with the above mentioned strategy of digitalizing and making EU archive publications available online. Internet users can still go to archives (e.g. Internet Archive – www.archive.org), but even they don't guarantee access to every version of EU page available online. Relatively sure

³¹ Regulation (EC) No. 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission Documents, "Official Journal" L 145, 31.05.2001 p. 43–48.

³² A. Ogonowska, *Narzędzia informacyjne utworzone na mocy unijnych regulacji o dostępie do dokumentów – analiza i ocena wartości informacyjnej. Część II. Udostępnianie bezpośrednio dokumentów*, "Studia Europejskie" 2006, No. 4, p. 85–105.

³³ Eadem, *Narzędzia informacyjne utworzone na mocy unijnych regulacji o dostępie do dokumentów – analiza i ocena wartości informacyjnej. Część I. Rejestry dokumentów*, "Studia Europejskie" 2006, No. 3, p. 127–148.

³⁴ Concerns were voiced in 1997. In 2011 they were all the more visible. Cf. H.M. Sheehy, *A community closer to its citizens: The European Union's use of the Internet*, "Government Information Quarterly" Vol. 14 (1997), No. 2, p. 117–143.

and stable is information that is compulsory online, based on Regulation 1049/2001. Data stored in bases also seems to be holding up well.

Using the Internet as a dialog with European Union citizens

In 2001, the European Commission began to modernize their flag internet website – Europa³⁵. Changes concerned implementing systems allowing a dialog with citizens and introducing solutions to provide certain services electronically. The exchange of information between EU institutions and citizens has a long tradition of public consultations, yet for many years, it has been carried out in the traditional form of exchanging printed documents, occasionally through round-tables, discussion panels etc. At that time, it usually engaged NGOs, professional organizations, entrepreneurs, interest groups or representatives of EU citizens selected in different ways. The emergence of the Internet became an opportunity to modernize this traditional consultation process by using new communication techniques. Their benefits are enormous. First of all, consultations themselves became more visible, encouraging potential users to share their own knowledge and opinion on a subject. The Internet also enables the publication of the consultation process (opinions are visible for all members of the consultation, or even those interested in the topic). The second advantage is the quick and easy exchange of opinion.

Electronic consultations became a fact in the EU, although they did not altogether replace traditional methods of discussing problems. The best example is the portal “Your Voice in Europe”, which in the Consultations tab³⁶ gives the possibility of expressing one’s opinion about the future of EU legal regulations, White and Green Papers of the European Commission and its plans of action. Participants of the consultation mostly use e-mail in their communication with the Commission. In some cases, authors of the consultation prepare questionnaires, which require participants to answer certain questions, and facilitate later work on the outcome of the consultation. When they are finished, everyone can view the outcome (a report is usually issued, summarizing voices in the discussion) and the actions resulting from them.

³⁵ *Communication by the president to the Commission in agreement with vice-president Neil Kinnock and Mr. Erkki Liikanen. Towards the e-Commission. EUROPA 2nd generation. Advanced web services to citizens, business and other professional users, Brussels 2001.*

³⁶ See: http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_pl.htm.

Other examples of using the Internet as a dialog with citizens are public debates on topics connected with European issues. The “Dialogue on Europe”³⁷ debate from 2000 was the first to use the Internet and its tools. Its subject was the institutional reform connected with the upcoming enlargement of the EU in 2004. It was followed by the largest gathering in the history of European integration – “Debate on the future of the European Union” – which gave social organizations a chance to publish opinions about the reform on the Futurum site³⁸. Unfortunately, the EU itself did not care to keep the internet archive of both debates. Only the “Debate on Europe”³⁹ from February 2010 was archived, but there is no certainty if after a few years this data won’t be deleted as well.

What is interesting is that the Internet forced the European Commission to broaden the circle of people beginning their dialogue with the EU. The strategy of using the Internet to inform citizens, published by the Commission in December 2007, stated that the site “Debates on Europe” will allow statements of Commissioners and high-ranking officials of the Commission⁴⁰, which was consistent with former practices of speaking on behalf of this institution⁴¹. In the same document one can read that employees of the European Commission, abiding to the rules of loyalty and impartiality, have the right to publicly speak about the EU online. This was a substantial change in the current communication practice. As a form of activity, it was most often practiced by employees of communication departments or by spokespersons of the Commission. These activities had the purpose of explaining EU policies and helping rectify mistakes⁴².

Already in 2010, the EU changed the way it uses the Internet for public debates. The European Commission decided to refrain from the current form of creating separate services for debates and began using social network sites for this purpose. What is important, it decided to employ specialists, who on behalf of the institution, implemented its information priorities in social media⁴³.

Another form of dialogue with citizens is Internet-aided mechanisms of collecting feedback. To make communicating easier, many institutions prepared online forms for EU

³⁷ *Dialogue on Europe: the Challenges of Institutional Reform: first public debate on 8 March 2000*, Brussels 2000, press release of the European Commission IP/00/219.

³⁸ *The Convention and the debate on the future of the European Union on the Internet*, Brussels 2002, press release of the European Commission MEMO/02/41.

³⁹ Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/archives/debateeurope/index_pl.htm.

⁴⁰ Communication to the Commission. Communicating about Europe via the Internet. Engaging the citizens, Brussels 2007, p. 9, SEC(2007)1742.

⁴¹ A. Ogonowska, *Rola służb prasowych i audiowizualnych instytucji unijnych w polityce informacyjnej Unii Europejskiej*, “Studia Europejskie” 2007, No. 4, p. 11.

⁴² Communication to the Commission. Communicating about Europe..., p. 13.

⁴³ The letter from Viviane Reading to José Manuela Barroso, 21.06.2010, D(2010)1036.

citizens. An example can be forms to access documents, petitions to the European Parliament, complaints to the European Ombudsman. Others concern consulting services for citizens, such as Your Europe Advice, SOLVIT or Europe Direct, which aid in solving particular cases, but also serve as feedback for European institutions. Based on them, an evaluation of the current situation and planning future action is possible.

Apart from the above mentioned tools, the easiest form of communicating with EU institutions is of course email. Disclosing email addresses of all EU employees is not a common practice and is restricted to a public mailbox serviced by special teams.

In the article published in 2008, Asimina Michailidou⁴⁴ claimed that official European Commission documents do not confirm the key role of the Internet in facilitating public dialogue in the EU. This results from the unclear status of the dialogue itself in the decision making process of the organization. Stephen Boucher⁴⁵ sheds some light on the issue, after a thorough analysis of example public debates initialized by the EU. He concluded that their results were disappointing and have little meaning for the decision making process in the organization. They can however be used to engage citizens in EU issues. The role of the Internet in this field is not foregone. Perhaps an impulse to continue thoughts on the problem will be a practical realization of the law on European citizens' initiative⁴⁶.

Using Web 2.0 tools

Using Web 2.0 tools in the EU communication policy is a novelty. According to the results of Eurobarometer polls concerning social network sites from 2011⁴⁷, a majority (56 per cent) of EU citizens have nothing whatsoever to do with them. The remaining part admitting to this kind of online activity, especially the younger generation, seems very attached to it. An interesting fact is that according to Eurostat data⁴⁸, social network sites are the most popular in Poland. Our primacy in this field is the result of not only the online activity of young people, but also of the remaining age groups.

⁴⁴ A. Michailidou, *Democracy and New Media in the European Union: Communication or Participation Deficit?*, "Journal of Contemporary European Research" Vol. 4 (2008), No. 4, p. 552.

⁴⁵ S. Boucher, *If citizens have a voice, who's listening? Lessons from recent citizen consultation experiments for the European Union*, "EPIN Working Papers" 2009, No. 24, p. 1–23.

⁴⁶ Regulation (EU) No. 211/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 2011 on the citizens' initiative, "Official Journal of the European Union" L 65, 11.03.2011, p. 1-22.

⁴⁷ *The use of media in general*, "Standard Eurobarometer. Information on European Political Matters" No. 74 (2011), p. 19.

⁴⁸ *80% of young internet users in the EU27 active on social media*, "Eurostat News Release" 2010, No. 193, p. 3, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/4-14122010-BP/EN/4-14122010-BP-EN.PDF [accessed: 16.11.2011].

Blogs were one of the first forms of establishing contact with society by EU officials using Web 2.0 tools. They were first used by EU commissioners Margot Wallström and Janez Potočnik. Now, six commissioners use this form of communication, as well as head of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy, the European Economic and Social Committee president Staffan Nilsson and others. Analyzing the blog of Wallström (and two other politicians), Stephen Coleman and Giles Moss⁴⁹ concluded that these were attempts of high-ranking UE officials to seem like ordinary people and being able to interact with average EU citizens. They also noticed that this new way of communicating changes the perception of distance between citizens and politicians, which in turn can lead to a change in the social and political style of communicating.

The main impulse to use Web 2.0 tools by the European Commission was the failure of the Constitution for Europe project. Those analyzing the cause of rejecting the treaty in France noticed that its opponents were very active on social network sites, as opposed to enthusiasts of the document. Similar conclusions were made from the election campaign of Barack Obama⁵⁰. This encouraged many commissioners to create a profile on Facebook and Twitter, which is used by them personally or their spokesperson in their name. Such profiles were also made for the entire European Commission. Today, they are very popular among Internet users. Additionally, the European Commission has assigned a special team to update them, equipped with tools for researching online activities and therefore better planning their own actions⁵¹.

An interesting example of change in the style of communicating thanks to the Internet, were the actions of Van Rompuy during the meetings of the European Council in December 2010. Before the end of the summit and the usual announcing of its outcome on a press conference, the President of the Council, via Twitter, made it public that an agreement was reached in creating a resolution fund for the eurozone⁵². It's hard to suspect an experienced politician of playing this message as a prank. Rather, it confirms that social networking services change the approach to political communication.

⁴⁹ S. Coleman, G. Moss, *Governing at a distance: politicians in the blogosphere*, "Information Polity" 13 (2008), No. 1/2, p. 19.

⁵⁰ P. Desmarest, *Facebook, Twitter: are these the unavoidable tools for the future of European democracy?*, "European Issue. Robert Schuman Foundation Policy Paper" No. 207 (2011), p. 3–4.

⁵¹ *The importance of taking measures*, blog entry in "Writing for y(EU)" from 26.10.2011, www.ep-webeditors.eu/?s=importance+of+taking+measures [accessed: 17.11.2011]; *Meet the Social Media Team*, entry in the blog "Waltzing Matilda" from 20.10.2011, [accessed: 17.11.2011].

⁵² H. Van Rompuy, *Text of treaty amendment agreed*, Twitter entry from 16.12.2010, <http://twitter.com/#!/EUHVR> [accessed: 17.11.2011].

Another example of using social network sites is creating the EUtube channel on the popular YouTube service. The European Union, lacking the chance to exist in traditional state media, for the first time found a platform, by means of which it could reach the masses with its audiovisual message. Oddly enough, EUtube is used as traditional one-way communication on the EU⁵³. Maja Turnšek and Nicholas Warren Jankowski⁵⁴ point out that the same service is used by social organizations to engage Internet users in diverse social events, which EU institutions don't actually do. The only EU campaign which used the EUtube channel was dedicated to saving energy sources⁵⁵. Yet during the four years of its existence, that is not much. A similar situation is with using Flickr to describe, through pictures, the events in EU institutions. Adding to it no possibility of commenting videos on EUtube, it can be assumed that the "social" potential of these tools was not used⁵⁶. A positive example of appreciating the role of social network sites in the communication activities of the EU could be their use in distributing information on recruiting employees for the European Commission⁵⁷.

Analyzing the blog entries⁵⁸ of the European Commission team in charge of social media, it seems that for long time the institution did not have a strategy for using social media in their communication policy, although the presence of the EU on these services was not questioned. The Commission team, experimenting with different Internet tools, tried to collect as much experience as possible to service to this enormous international organization. Finally, it was decided that social media will be used to inform on political priorities and in campaign communication. Employees were also allowed to communicate on the sites, but in their own capacity⁵⁹. Regarding this last point, guidelines for the staff were prepared⁶⁰.

⁵³ *European Commission seeks to improve its communication via audiovisual media*, Brussels 2008, press release of the European Commission IP/08/640.

⁵⁴ M. Turnšek, N.W. Jankowski, *Social Media and Politics: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Designing a Study of Political Engagement*. Paper presented at "Politics: Web 2.0: An International Conference", Royal Holloway, University of London, April 17–18, 2008.

⁵⁵ *The Commission launches a campaign to promote energy efficient driving*, Brussels 2008, press release of the European Commission IP/08/804.

⁵⁶ *EUTUBE – what can be done better?*, blog entry in "Waltzing Matilda" from 29.10.2010, http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/waltzing_matilda/eutube-%E2%80%93-what-can-be-done-better/ [accessed: 28.11.2011].

⁵⁷ *EPSO recruiting through social media*, blog entry in "Waltzing Matilda" from 17.06.2010, http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/waltzing_matilda/epso-recruiting-through-social-media/ [accessed: 28.11.2011].

⁵⁸ *Waltzing Matilda* – http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/waltzing_matilda/.

⁵⁹ European Commission, *Use of Social Media in EU communication*, [s.l.] ca. 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/go_live/web2_0/index_en.htm#N100F4 [accessed: 2.12.2011].

⁶⁰ European Commission, *Communicating with the outside world. Guidelines for all staff on the use of social media*, [s.l.] ca. 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/docs/guidelines_social_media_en.pdf [accessed: 2.12.2011].

Conclusions

Concluding the above thoughts, one can easily claim that the Internet has left its mark on EU political communication and its information system. Changes that this new medium sparked will continue to take place, but already now we can see that it is mostly a communication medium for EU institutions. From the point of view of the information receiver, it is still not the main source providing information, but most likely soon, due to changes in the media system, it will be just that.

The ease with which the EU has a possibility to showcase information about itself made it necessary to rethink the content made available online. It is visible in the changes of the layout and scope, but also the form of information served on internet servers of this organization. First of all, a clear direction towards target groups is noticeable and a retreat from providing only a textual message. Using images and video has become an inseparable element of communication tasks. A novelty is also going outside EU internet sites and using social network services. It is an attempt to adjust the communication form to the preferences of chosen user groups.

The presence of a new universal medium caused a transformation in the dissemination and information archival policies. Sums saved on the production, storage and distribution of printed materials were used for other purposes. However, resigning from fees for publishing and access to databases caused in turn a necessity to find within the budget resources for their creation and maintenance online. The EU handled these challenges quite well. It was more clumsy when it came to the archival policy and organizing EU data. While books, periodicals and ephemeral prints were made available online, Internet sites themselves were in this case neglected. Transformation in the dissemination and archival policy in a significant way influenced the remaining elements of the EU information system – most strongly the networks of information centers. Their task is to supply documents and information, which the EU offers, with information materials prepared by other subjects. Part of their task is becoming an aid in navigating through Internet sources.

The Internet has become an important tool in fulfilling the openness policy of the EU. Actually, it is difficult to imagine how this policy could be successfully implemented without it. In this field, the EU can write off a great success, the amount of information made available online is impressive. It should however be noted that the ease with which the data is made available increases user demand for information. Their pressure causes a gradual disclosure of fields of EU activity that were traditionally off-limits.

The Internet changes the traditional understanding of political communication. Thanks to social network sites, EU politicians, officials and diplomats began go against the rules, codes of actions and usual customs. A great example of this trend is granting access to participate in EU debates to low-ranking civil servants of the European Commission.

On the many fields of its communication policy, the European Union can perceive its use of the Internet as a success. The idea of employing it as a means of dialogue with citizens is still to be established. Despite numerous declarations, so far, the idea did not gain a full realization on a large scale, although Internet tools provide the possibility. The language problem remains unsolved and an increase in the amount of information causes it to be more and more visible.