

Background paper: Blogging about EU politics / Th!nk about it

1. The Euroblogosphere – Little brother watching?

a) General remarks

Many issues that affect people's daily lives can only be seen in a European context. The European Union has become a transnational political project that should not be ignored. But the political public sphere remains concentrated on a national level. "Brussels" is often seen from a national perspective, generally there is a severe lack of interest in European Institutions and European policies. There is certainly a lack of basic knowledge about EU issues among citizens that leads to general ignorance and apathy. At the same time institutional shortcomings on the EU level, the missing politization of EU politics and the tendency of local/national media to ignore EU issues contribute to this trend.

A European public sphere is constituted of many partial public spheres that represent interest groups, elites and experts. However, a European public sphere for the masses does not exist. Blogs are just one form of the new "social media" that are being used by internet citizens to share opinions and experiences. Other social media tools include social networks (Facebook), podcasts, Twitter, wikis, videos as well as tools such as Wikileaks.

The euroblogosphere can be understood as a virtual European public sphere. 'Euroblogs' have a European focus and are mostly written by people that have a special interest in European politics ("political information junkies"). The Blogosphere is young, but it shows some signs of potentially evolving into a miniature public sphere of its own, a sphere of shared interests rather than shared geography.

Political Blogs are an alternative source for opinion and commentary. They provide an additional forum of debate. They will coexist with traditional media. Most well-known EU political blogs on the net are published by well-known individuals (European commissioners, newspaper editors, etc) or well-known traditional media brands (BBC, Financial Times,). On an individual level, one can only grow within a network or platform for bloggers. However, some individual blogs are well regarded in a small expert audience. Projects like thinkaboutit.eu and bloggingportal.eu also increase the visibility of EU blogging.

Blogging will become more important in Europe too - it will simply take a little longer.

b) Function of political blogs – Information, debate and opinion formation

- Information management: creation of issue centred public spheres. In the US, blogs have become an alternative source for information and encourage and improve political discussions.
- relation management: creation of networks and interpersonal communication
- identity management: opinion formation

c) European Politics and Blogs: 'a finger in the eye of mainstream media' (Graf 2006)?

- "Blogs are only as powerful as decision makers allow them to be..." (Glover 2006)
- European Commission new internet strategy: the recent change to the Commission's rules and procedures for allowing its staff to speak in public on professional matters will be extended to include participation in blogs and online debates.
- All members of directly elected assemblies (national, regional and also MEPs) will face an increasing demand for transparency and openness from a new, generally better informed, web audience.

- What is needed is a slight change in the way that European institutions communicate. Instead of restricting access to officials or spokespersons, a new culture of responsiveness and open dialogue is needed.
- Blogs of MEPs and European Commissioners have already become important communication tools. Politicians in Europe are beginning to grasp the opportunity that blogs offer to connect with citizens.

d) Problems and Challenges

- the euroblogosphere is too fragmented and too small to have a real impact, compared with the US not many scoops have been produced by blogs
- some debates are very ideological – British problem?
- The quality of the blogs is very uneven. In addition, some blogs publish on a regular (daily) basis, others have only a few posts per month.
- In particular, it is questionable whether blogs will reach the citizens who are not already knowledgeable about the EU. The specialised nature of blogs makes them fit to raise interest from an elite that already has an interest in EU affairs.
- Most professional journalists consider the new generation of bloggers as lacking professional standards and ethics although, at the same time, many journalists started writing blogs! Some of the most successful EU blogs are written by EU journalists!
- A general problem in pan- European debates are obviously the various language barriers.
- RSS/technical experience of the average citizen is still limited. Many citizens lack basic skills when it comes to reading and evaluating news published online!

e) Main Questions that need to be addressed by local campaigns:

- What difference does it make which party/candidate I vote for in the the European Parliament elections?
- What is the European Parliament doing and how does it work? What role does it play in EU decision making?

2. “Th!nk about it” Political Blogging Project in the context of the European Parliament elections 2009 – Lessons learnt

a) What is “Th!nk about it”?

“Th!nk about it” - The European blogging competition launched in January 2009 and can be found here: www.thinkaboutit.eu It is a dynamic community of bloggers, journalists and journalism students, a forum alive with debate and discussion, a creative portal to inspire youth involvement with the 2009 Parliamentary Elections – organised by the European Journalism Centre (EJC).”

The European Journalism Centre’s goal is to get European youth to THINK about the European Union, to engage in the political arena, and to inform themselves about the Parliamentary Elections in June 2009. The EJC invited bloggers from each of the 27 European member states to participate in THINK ABOUT IT, totalling 81 participants.

“Th!nk about it” encourages Europeans to express their ideas and concerns about the European Union through four months of writing, reporting and covering developments in the EU and linking EU news with national and local news. One of the aims is also to show the potential of political blogging in a EU context. The competition began on February 1st and ends June 9th.

“Think about it” is a web experiment but also a political experiment both in content and form. It is the first time that political blogging has been used on such a scale in a European context.

b) Social media integration

Working with social media tools poses several important strategic issues. Integration of different tools and channels is important as different people use different tools. Not only do they use different tools they tend to use it for different things. So different social media tools are used for different target groups and different purposes!

- main blogging website: www.thinkaboutit.eu → the central blog with the main debate
- facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=97455490141> → Advertising of the project in the application phase (Oct 2008-Dec 2008), event coordination
- twitter: think09: <http://twitter.com/think09> → Advertising in order to increase readership, highlighting of interesting articles, live twittering from launch event
- own expert community: <http://we.thinkaboutit.eu/> → internal communication, community building with interested readers based on ning software
- regular emails to participants → internal communication mainly for organisational purposes
- Traditional promotion online and offline: Links from the European Parliament election page + blogosphere + EJC promotion at conferences at through organisational publications and newsletters

c) Community Building – based on knowledge creation and debate

- Kick off event in Brussels in January 2009 (EU politics briefing)– Closing event in Rotterdam in June 2009. During the 2-day event in Brussels participants met each other, networked and learned about blogging and the EU. The event's programme was both a conference and a conversation, and included a full day at the European Parliament.
- Editorial Support – 4 editors (experienced bloggers) help “Th!nk”- Bloggers to find topics and write good posts. Editors will give feedback on the blog posts, techniques, topics and journalistic standards. Each editor is responsible for a group of 20 bloggers to track throughout the competition. The editors will also be involved in the allocation of prizes.
- Language Support – English Grammar and vocabulary + proofreading offered for “Th!nk” - Bloggers by native speaker.
- Internal social community (based on a NING installation) for networking, sharing ideas and getting support (www.we.thinkaboutit.eu)

d) Evaluation (half-time)

- Authors: 81 out of which 68 wrote a blog post, after 75 days there were 339 posts and 1,273 comments.
- Inclusion of other EU bloggers (as editors and guest bloggers) secured a positive acceptance within the blogosphere
- Credible institutional support: European Journalism Centre as a professional organisation for journalists
- Staffing: 1 full time person at EJC + IT support at EJC using free open source software (wordpress)
- Financial resources by the European Commission very appreciated for travel expenses as the event in Brussels helped to establish the group of Th!nkers
- No editorial control in place which is a fundamental blogging principle
- EU Blogging as a learning experience: In order to write a opinion about a EU issue one needs to check the facts and defend the opinion in the comments
- The competition aspect is one way to increase motivation.
- Thinkaboutit covered many different aspects and stories from almost all EU member states,

sometimes topics that were not reported in traditional media.

- Thinkaboutit established itself as a platform for exchanging ideas on EU issues but also as a interesting example on how to engage citizens in (EU) politics.

3. How to monitor EU news and social media? - A quick guide

a) How to monitor EU news?

- Use a RSS feedreader e.g. Google Reader, Netvibes, Bloglines, Pageflakes, iGoogle, or follow RSS in your email programme or get a firefox add-on!
- News monitoring of EU issues should become a daily routine for anyone that manages a community/debate/Q&A on EU affairs. Linking local, national and European news is essential!

	EU Print Media	EU online Media	EU institutional media	EU blogs
Sources	European Voice New Europe Financial Times International Herald Tribune Wall Street Journal	EUObserver.com EurActiv.com TheParliament.com eubusiness.com eux.tv	EU Press room EBS – Audiovisual Service Presidency website European Parliament EP groups & MEP websites	EU Blog platforms: thinkaboutit.eu cafebabel.com blogactiv.eu + many independent blogs → bloggingportal.eu
Aggregation tools	eufedds.eu EU Media News Europe Media Monitor: http://emm.jrc.it eu4journalists.eu eurotopics.net (EN,DE, FR) Openeurope.com Politikportal.eu (DE)		europa.eu/eucalendar	bloggingportal.eu

b) How to monitor EU Blogs?

Tracking the EU blogosphere with www.bloggingportal.eu:

- Extensive database of blogs on EU affairs (ca. 200)
- Multilingual aggregator for all articles (beta)
- Categorisation by policy areas
- Highlighting of articles by editors
- RSS and email newsletter services for easy subscription (beta)
- Non-profit project developed and run by volunteers
- Aims: to become the central hub of the EU blogosphere, increasing traffic on individual blogs, increasing quality and reputation of EU blogs

4. Resources

a) Online Resources

- Blog for a cause! <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/projects/guide-blog-for-a-cause/>
- Advocacy 2.0 Guide: <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/projects/advocacy-20-guide-tools-for-digital-advocacy/>
- Online Politics 101: The Tools and Tactics of Online Political Advocacy - <http://www.epolitics.com/download-online-politics-101/>
- The Quick 'n Easy Guide to Online Advocacy: <http://onlineadvocacy.tacticaltech.org/>
- Message-in-a-Box – Tools and tactics to communicate your cause : <http://www.messageinabox.tacticaltech.org/>
- DigiActive: <http://www.digiactive.org>
- The DigiActive Guide to Twitter for Activism: http://www.digiactive.org/wp-content/uploads/digiactive_twitter_guide_v1-0.pdf

b) Literature

- Chadwick, Andrew 2006: Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies. Oxford University Press
- Chadwick, Andrew/ Philip N. Howard, 2008: Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics. Routledge, London
- Glover, Daniel K. (2006) 'The Rise Of Blogs' In: http://beltwayblogroll.nationaljournal.com/archives/2006/01/the_rise_of_blo.php.
- Graf, Josef (2006) 'The audience for political blogs'. In: <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/The%20Audience%20for%20Political%20Blogs.pdf>

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