

European Commission DG Communication

Evaluation of the EUROPA Website

Executive Summary

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1 Executive Summary

The DG Communication of the European Commission entrusted Ernst & Young to conduct the evaluation of EUROPA website between June 2007 and January 2008.

For the EU institutions, the Internet has become a crucial tool for:

- Disseminating all the information produced in their areas of competence to the European public and the rest of the world in real time;
- Interactive communication with citizens and business through dedicated mailboxes, online consultation, online forums and debates.

Recently a number of policy initiatives¹ were taken to set out a general political context and some objectives for communication and information activities.

1.1 Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The aim of the evaluation is to assess the usability, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and utility of the European Union website EUROPA for the part directly managed by the Directorate-General Communication (DG COMM) of the European Commission (i.e the inter-institutional pages and the Commission web site top level pages²).

EUROPA website evaluation notably ascertains if, how and how much the EUROPA website contributes to European Union (EU) efforts to improve communication by identifying who are EUROPA website visitors, what are their needs and expectations and their level of satisfaction on the current services provided by EUROPA (provision of information, services and opportunities for dialogue). It concludes on many recommendations in order to improve those services, to attract additional visitors and adapt the current EU strategy on communication.

1.2 Method and tools

The evaluation process last 7 months and consisted in answering to four evaluation questions raised by the terms of reference. A large data collection has been carried out.

- A large survey, available in 23 languages has been launched on the site and more than 8000 thousands of visitors answered it.
- 11 Focus groups and interviews have been conducted with European citizens, EU professionals from the public and private sectors, young people and disabled persons.
- Benchmarks screened 30 sites from the public and private sphere and aimed at identifying best practices and assess the position of EUROPA in the internet sphere.
- Log files analysis on the basis of 72 parameters and 7 485 753 lines, each corresponding to a click on the EUROPA website, during one day.
- Usability tests encompassed expert review (usability inspection aimed at finding usability problems in the design), expert walkthrough (to test navigation scenarios through the search engine and the classic hierarchical system.), automatic and manual test approach.

Data analyses led to the formulation of both strategic and pragmatic recommendations.

¹ Action plan SEC (2005)985, Plan D COM (2005)494final, White paper on Communication COM(2006)35final

² approximately 90 sites

1.3 Strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation design

The evaluation team did not encounter major problem. The evaluation design appears to be adapted to the evaluation requirement: the evaluation questions, judgment criteria and indicators created were operational. The feedback from beneficiaries (interviews, open questions within the questionnaire) was a crucial source of information and analysis.

Several points that limited the scope of the evaluation have to be noted, even if they did not hamper to completion of the evaluation process:

- Only actual users of the EUROPA website could take part in this survey, the pop-up window was not placed on other external websites.
- For the analysis of log files, some of the parameters contained missing data and some parameters provided were not usable.

1.4 Main conclusions of the evaluation

To what extent does EUROPA satisfy the diverse citizens' needs in terms of information (relevance and effectiveness)?

- **The evaluation gave us the opportunity to identify both the profiles of the users and their specific needs. The strategy of EUROPA remains insufficiently defined regarding these needs.**

The characteristics of the **EUROPA users** are as follows:

- EUROPA is used 90% by EU Member State nationals,
- EUROPA is used equally by men and women,
- They are mainly students and employees (a large number of them working in public administration and education),
- 88% speak English. The other most frequent languages are French, German, Spanish and Italian. These five languages cover nearly 100% of users' linguistic needs,
- 64% of users are frequent users (weekly),
- 90% of the respondents use the Internet as a means to receive information on the EU.

The current **strategy of EUROPA appears to be not sufficiently defined**: target publics are identified but without the adequate level of precision Users needs are not known and followed. The knowledge of the current users of EUROPA could contribute to refine the strategy.

- **Specific information needs exist but there is a common body of information looked for: general information on the EU, its institutions, its policies... Needs greatly depend on the professional situation of the users, the age of the users and the frequency of use**

Indeed, the **effective users of the EUROPA website have different profiles according to specific needs**, as testified by the evaluation (online survey and focus groups), confirming that the EUROPA website has to propose a wide range of information and services.

The **dichotomy of personal/professional** reasons for using EUROPA seems to be the most distinguishing factor.

Needs are different depending on :

- the professional situation (for instance expert stakeholders, information multipliers and opinion leaders need specific and sectorial information, +10% of respondents compared to the average percentage of 41%,

- the “place of residence” (for instance, the group “Romania or Bulgaria” especially needs information on EU institutions, +7% to 11%),
- the age of users: for instance users under 18 look especially for general information; +21% compared to the average percentage of on line survey respondents; and information for educational purposes; +13% compared to the average percentage of respondents);
- the frequency of use of EUROPA has a significant impact on the users’ needs: for instance, frequent users look especially for more technical information; economic sector, EU policies and legislation, practical matters.

■ **Looking for information is the main reason why users come on EUROPA website**

The **search for information** is a major reason explaining why users visit the EUROPA website. General information on the EU is the first type of information looked for by any kind of public. The respondents however look for more specific information on EU institutions, on a specific economic sector, on EU policies and future legislation, on practical matters and for educational purposes.

There is also a clear need concerning **updated information**.

Most users are not familiar with EUROPA’s extensive content. Apart from a few exceptions (homepage for 68% of respondents, EUR-Lex for 44% and EU at glance for 44%), other portals are known about by less than 30% of respondents.

■ **Overall, information on EUROPA adequately meets the users’ needs**

Globally, the **level of satisfaction is high**: 85% of respondents find information corresponding to their needs. 79% of respondents are satisfied with the EUROPA website. However, the level of satisfaction **varies from one public to another**: users under 18 consider the EUROPA website to be a good website compared to others (51% against 43% for total respondents). 43% of respondents believe that the EUROPA website is better or much better than other similar websites.

Users globally find the information they look for. 81% of the 8 212 respondents always or frequently find the information they look for. 72% of the 8 212 respondents find the information they are looking for in 15 minutes or less, but only 24% in less than 5 minutes. The link between the ability to find information and the satisfaction concerning EUROPA’s look is confirmed. **The website is too complex for the general public and not organised enough for civil servants or professionals.**

The **language coverage for information is good** in the users’ opinion. A high percentage of respondents “frequently” or “always” find the information in a language they are comfortable with (89%) but the level of satisfaction is closely linked to the language availability for the information.

■ **However, some needs are uncovered or badly covered, but not concerning content: dissatisfaction is focused on website structure and its ergonomics.**

However, **some needs remain uncovered or badly covered**, but not concerning content: **dissatisfaction is focused on website structure and its ergonomics** (navigability uneasy depending on pages, accessibility of information, and organization of the information). The website is too complex for the general public. The website is not organised enough for civil servants or professionals. Time required to find information and services is too long. Technical and political information are sometimes set out together, it could be confusing for users.

To what extent do the transaction services provided through EUROPA cover the needs of the different target publics (utility and effectiveness)?

■ **Various services are proposed on the website and all of them are used.**

Various services are proposed on the website (legal advices, public contract submission, enrolling for events, finding a job...). They are all used, leading to the idea that users have **heterogeneous needs**. Only 2 522 respondents out of 8 214 **do not require any transaction service (31%)**.

However, two types of services are especially used: **Europe direct and services dedicated to job searches**.

Users or potential users often look for very specific services answering **pragmatic questions**:

- How is it possible to **travel** in Europe?
- How is it possible to **study** in Europe?
- What are the **job opportunities** and how is it possible to find a job in European countries?
- What are the **differences in regulations** between European countries?

■ **A high level of satisfaction regarding the transaction services : there is a direct link between satisfaction and accessibility**

The **level of satisfaction is high** (84% of respondents using services) and users have a good opinion of the usefulness of the services provided (useful or very useful for 85% of respondents).

Three users out of four find the services they look for. Compared with the accessibility of information (81%), the percentage is lower. When users have access to the services, they are often satisfied but the level of satisfaction rises with the ease experienced by the user in accessing the services: 54% found the time too long or much too long. There seems to be a **direct link between the ability of the users to find the services they look for, and their perception of the usefulness** of the services provided on EUROPA : when they find quickly the service, they are satisfied. Nevertheless, some **services are not always visible and they are badly known**

The **language coverage for services is good** in the users' opinion (86% of users).

To what extent does EUROPA allow for dialogue with the citizens on European issues (effectiveness)?

The EUROPA website provides **good opportunities for interactive communication** between citizens and the Commission, or amongst citizens. The **benchmark** approach reveals that the EUROPA website is **one of the public sites that offer the highest level of interaction services**. The most popular channels are e-mails, online consultation (46% of respondents for each of them) and FAQ (34% of respondents). They are mostly "traditional" channels in comparison with others (chats, blogs, etc.)

If the users' profile for tools dedicated to dialogue is fairly similar to the average respondents even there are specificities depending on channels of communication. (blog users for instance are not the same as phone users).

The level of **satisfaction** concerning interactive services is **more contrasted than for information or services**. Only 57% of respondents believe that these services meet their needs. Only 26% of respondents perceive these services as an opportunity to express themselves.

For active users of communication channels, the criticisms are exactly the same as for information: **clarity and accessibility should be strengthened**. In addition, current users would require **state-of-the-art technology**.

The accessibility of those services from the Home page is the major concern. The available **debate tools are not well known by users**. **46% did not know any of the services proposed** and users do not especially visit EUROPA for dialogue. One-to-one interviews show that citizens do not participate in debates amongst themselves, mainly because of the **difficulty in finding the debate tools/sections on the website** (during focus groups, only 35% of users found the Debate Europe

section, and statistics from the online survey show that only 8% see EUROPA as a means to express their opinion on European policies and positions with fellow Europeans). In addition, users have **difficulties in finding the contact details**, and thus interact with EUROPA (only 60% of users in the focus group found the contact tool for the Europe Direct section, 30% of users from the online survey have trouble communicating through EUROPA). **Even for experienced users are facing those difficulties.**

Therefore, there is a **gap between the Commission's will to position EUROPA as a means to dialogue and the users' perception and current use.**

Consequently, **two solutions are formulated:**

- **To create the need** (promotion, better tools, major place on the website, etc.).
- **To provide means in proportion to the importance of the need**, i.e. reduced.

This choice has to be made taking into account that the **perception of usefulness is quite positive**. Nearly **one user out of two perceives consultations and feedback mechanisms as an efficient way to contribute to the shaping of the policies**, activities and services of the EU (46% believe that the site is useful, 21% useless, and 33% are without an opinion).

The conclusion of the evaluation on this point is straightforward: interactive services have to be strengthened in order to build on their added value. But if these services are not improved, they could be, for most of them abandoned: accessibility and ergonomics of interactive services have to be reviewed.

The challenge is simple: by increasing the quality of interactive services, EUROPA could attract new users. Moreover, by favouring types of interactive services, it is possible to target another kinds of publics.

To what extent does EUROPA provide a coherent, user-friendly set of information and communication tools (efficiency)?

■ The website is not sufficiently well-structured

- 67% of the respondents of the online survey have a positive opinion on the website structure
- The website is not clearly structured: the structuring of the pages is not homogeneous
- The structure of the site does not facilitate an easy and quick access to the information nor to the transaction services

■ The search engine does not provide an efficient means of finding information

- Only 30% of respondents are familiar with the existence of the internal search engine
- If 81% of the users find the information looked for on EUROPA, the internal search engine is still a major concern:
- Too many users still use external search engines such as Google (69% of the respondents use Google to access EUROPA).

■ The navigation quality and the ergonomics of the website need to be improved

- Satisfaction : 25% of the users have a negative feeling regarding the navigation on EUROPA.

- The navigation logic is not the same throughout the website

EUROPA does not always offer the latest technologies (forums, access to blackberry, etc.) even if the communication tools are various and offer a high level of interactivity.

The EUROPA provides **good navigation for partially sighted people**. This could still be improved.

■ **EUROPA website uses good practices to be maintained or strengthened but reasons of dissatisfaction were identified**

- the navigation may imply an excessive number of downloaded pages (clicks needed), if we consider that over four pages downloaded, many users abandon their search,
- navigation through URL is difficult.
- The navigation on EUROPA and its accessibility are well ranked by partially sighted people, even if several criticisms were mentioned.

■ **A linguistic coverage in adequacy with the needs of the target groups**

The **linguistic coverage is well perceived** by users. But expectations are major, and the link between satisfaction and language coverage was noted. Therefore, if the language coverage is strengthened, this will probably have a direct impact on user satisfaction.

■ **The EUROPA website uses good practices to be maintained or strengthened**

- EUROPA authentication is not required at the homepage and does not need any specific software to display its content.
- The EUROPA website downloads fast.
- EUROPA seems to be quite well represented through the existence of external links.
- The EUROPA website is compatible with 96% of the web browsers used world-wide and is adapted to the resolution of the most common screens.
- Some visual means (photos, illustrations, fonts) are dedicated to improving the ergonomics, but their use is not uniform.
- The great majority of links are obvious in their intent and destination
- Navigation between related pages, and between different sections, is globally convenient, but the ease of navigation is lessened by several major loopholes.

1.5 Recommendations

Considering those analyses and main conclusions, the evaluation team formulated several strategic and pragmatic recommendations based on the following main themes:

Identify EUROPA users and their needs

Develop tools dedicated to the knowledge of users and of their needs. For example, a periodic survey could be implemented on the EUROPA homepage, on the basis of the questionnaire used during this evaluation. These tools should provide information on users: language, profession situation, location, channels of communication used.

Define a strategy for EUROPA

EUROPA's communication strategy should be formalized in a single document, based on:

- The effective users' profile
- The effective users' needs
- The potential users targeted
- The means to reach the targeted users

Satisfy their needs: the operational recommendations can be divided into four categories: organization/identity, technical modifications, language, promotion.

Organization and identity of the website

Create different entries for the website: the first page of the website could offer entries depending on the user profile (individuals, professional, citizens).

Provide a set of information or tools for each target public, selected on the basis of their principal needs: personalized newsletters, personalized web pages, files dedicated to categories of needs, Specific entries on the website depending on the needs of the users.

Enhance the identity of the website, and its objectives

- The objectives of EUROPA should be clearly mentioned on the website to avoid any confusion.
- The identity of the website must be clearly promoted in relation with the strategic objectives, by using pictures, wallpapers, etc.

Structure of the pages and sections:

- Provide more detailed descriptions concerning information in top-level pages.
- Mention clearly on the pages the type of information offered.
- Lighten the content of the pages by using bullet points or summary description pages, rather than pages built on particularly long sentences.
- Use an identical page framework for the whole website
- Centralize all links towards interactive communication tools in a unique topic accessible from the Homepage, and from every page.

Technical modifications

Improve the accessibility of information: the huge amount of information and its dispersion on EUROPA can affect users. Several tools could improve the situation:

- Providing links between pages for additional information.
- Providing "information files" on frequent subjects.
- Improving or abandoning the internal search engine:

Improve the navigability on the website:

- Inform the users when they are entering or leaving the website.
- Provide a return-to-homepage link.
- Provide better access to services such as videos, chat, blogs, by making them accessible from the left-hand side of the homepage (cf. Greenpeace website).
- Highlight the sections already visited.
- Provide an effective site map and not only an index.

- Use homogenous HTML source code on all pages.
- Improve navigation for disabled users on EUROPA by using the W3C standards.
- Make the EUROPA website accessible and readable from devices such as Blackberry.

Language modifications

- Increase the language coverage of EUROPA.
- Some services could be accessible in all of the official languages: EUROPE Direct, Job information, etc.
- Take into account the need for updated content in all languages:
 - o Make a distinction between temporary and permanent information.
 - o Indicate, for each type of information, the languages available.
 - o Provide temporary information in English only.
 - o Systematically provide permanent and technical information in 5 languages: English, German, French, Italian, Spanish (coverage rate of almost 100%).
 - o Provide crucial information in all official languages.

Improve promotion and communication

- Improve communication towards users located in candidate countries by using the communication channels used the most (blogs, forums, television, etc.).
- Improve Internet promotion through:
 - o Promotion within EUROPA: encourage current visitors of EUROPA to use the under-used services such as debate tools, by using banners or a specific access under the heading “interact with the EU”.
 - o Promotion outside EUROPA: reach non-users through a promotional campaign on the most visited websites at both national and European level.
- Develop a sense of belonging (citizenship) on the basis of material supports
- Bring EUROPA closer to the citizens:
 - o Provide immediate contact details such as email and telephone numbers on the homepage.
 - o Develop the dialogue services in order to introduce a contrary debate with the users who perceive the information on EUROPA as biased.
 - o Collect users’ points of view before editing some articles on the EU website.