EUROPEAN YEAR WEBSITE – A MEANS OF E-FRAMING CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract. Associated with a democratic and symbolic deficit, European Union has been promoting European issues through European Years (EY) since 1983. The European authorities annually select a topic which is to be implemented at the European, national, regional, and local level (e.g., 2013 is the EY of Citizens). The online environment facilitates the visibility of the European and national initiatives of promoting the European Years. Our analysis will focus on the analysis of the official website and the Facebook community profile of the EY of Citizens 2013 (EYC 2013). Our aim is to provide the salience of the online strategies used by the European authorities to inform, connect, interact with, and mobilize the European citizens to participate in online dialogues on citizenship.

Keywords: European Year 2013, e-public space, online strategies.

The Framework of a European e-Public Space

In their introduction to *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, Veronika Koller and Ruth Wodak (2008: 2) mention that the approaches on debates, a characteristic of the concept of public sphere, have changed from the Habermasian rational dialogue towards Bakhtin's participatory dialogue, heteroglossia. Thus the public sphere does no longer belong to some social formations (the Greek marketplace, the medieval German commons, the feudal court, coffee houses, salons of Western Europe, Habermas 1991: 363), but it has enlarged due to the technological development. As Zizi Papacharissi (2009: 9) claims the internet-based technologies hold "the promise of reviving the public sphere". Two main consequences have been brought by the digital evolution:

- the shaping of "a network society" defined as "a social formation with an infrastructure of social and media networks enabling its prime mode of organization at all levels (individual, group/organizational and societal)" (van Dijk 2006: 20);
- a double role of the internet (Papacharisi 2002: 11): a) as the new public space, providing another forum for deliberation, enhancing discussion; b) as the new public sphere, it promoting a democratic exchange of ideas and opinion.

The shift (O'Reilly 2005) from Web 1.0 (The Read Only Web") to Web 2.0 ("The Read Write Web") has facilitated this new e-public space where citizens' active participation plays an important role. Within this context of interconnecting people and of generating online content, the internet users are assigned four digital identities (Kim, Ni 2010: 46): *seekers* of information, *forwarders* of information, *sharers* of other online participants' information, *selectors* of an issue which they are motivated to debate upon or to solve.

Associated with a menace model, with a top-down communication or with an overwhelming central position imposing upon the Member-States seen as margins (Pribersky

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2006, Machin et al. 2006), European Union has been searching a reciprocal way of communicating with its citizens. One solution that has been implemented since 1983 is European Years (EY). Each year, the European Union has chosen a theme of action[1] in order to educate the widest possible audience, to attract the attention of the Member States' governments on a particular issue, and to change their attitudes or behaviours. Choosing the same topic to be annually implemented by Member States coincides with one of the conditions that Thomas Risse (2003: 2) considers to be important for an ideal typical European public sphere: "(...) [if and when] the same (European) themes [should be] discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media".

By selecting a European issue to be discussed simultaneously across national public spaces and media, turns European Years into "a social construction constituting a community of communication" (Risse 2003: 7). This community of communication has two types of embodiments:

- at a thematic level. For example, the main purpose of the European Year of Citizens 2013 is to "encourage dialogue at all levels of government, civil society and business, to explore where you – as citizens – want the EU to be by 2020 – in terms of rights, policies and governance"[2];
- at a technological level. Each European Year has a website and/or interactive social media platforms where citizens may find useful information about the European, national, regional, and local initiatives promoting the EY issue or may take part in the debates by generating useful content on various social, cultural, economic or political topics. For example, the European Year of Citizens 2013 had the website http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/, which provided links to social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Online Strategies of e-Communicating with Citizens

Starting from the literature on the strategies used for election campaigns (Gibson, Ward 2000; Foot, Schneider 2006; Lilleker et al. 2011) and on the use of social networks in organizational communication (Waters et al. 2009), we will develop (Cmeciu 2013) a framework of online strategies that may be used by public or private organizations in improving the online communication with their stakeholders. The strategies to be analyzed will refer to five main functions mentioned in the literature: *to inform, to connect, to engage/participate, to mobilize* and *to interact.*

The strategy of informing refers to the information posted by the organizations in order to make visible their activities and to provide useful content to stakeholders. The information posted may be either textual (mission statement, history, issue positions, press releases, etc.) or audio-visual (photos, videos, etc.). *The strategy of connecting* allows the creation of "bridges of digital communication" (Foot, Schneider 2006: 104) between organizations and stakeholders, other organizations and online community members. The main feature used is that of providing links to websites or social media tools belonging to other organizations. *The strategy of engaging/participation* allows online visitors to become active participants (Foot,

[1] http://en.strasbourg-europe.eu/european-year,27569,en.html (accessed 13 May 2012)
[2] http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/en/about/context

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Schneider 2006: 70). The online stakeholders may generate content, use various applications or provide a hierarchy of the most read or commented posts. *The strategy of mobilizing* is used to persuade online users to promote the organizations' actions either in the online or offline environment by sharing content, taking part in online contests, to like a post or a comment, etc. *The strategy of interacting* highlights the shift from one-way communication to bilateral symmetric communication through stakeholders' comments, debates on forums, or interactive games.

The aim of this study is to determine how the European Year of Citizens 2013 *(EYC 2013)* has used the five online strategies in the process of e-communicating with the European citizens. Since the main issue of *EYC 2013* is citizenship, the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environment should constitute means of active engagement and mobilizing European citizens.

Methodology and Research Questions

We will provide a content analysis of the *EYC 2013* website (http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/) and Facebook community profile (https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanYearOfCitizens?fref=ts). Starting from the literature on the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 strategies and reviewing the previous EY websites and Facebook profiles, we created a codebook (see Table 1) for the communication of European Years. Table 1 illustrates the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features adapted to each of the online strategy that may be used in promoting European Years. As observed, we included various variables for the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 strategies. The *EYC 2013* official website and Facebook community profile were evaluated (January 1 – August 1, 2013) for the presence of features representing the strategy of informing, connecting, engaging/participation, mobilizing, and interacting. The values of each Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 feature were coded as 0 (feature not present) or 1 (feature present).

Strategy of informing		*Strategy of connecting*	
Web 1.0 feature	Web 2.0 feature	Web 1.0 feature	Web 2.0 feature
- information about the EY (objectives, issue positions, press releases, communication toolbox, etc.); - news on the EY national campaigns; - news on events; - photos; - videos; - interviews of the EU officials or EY directorate general representatives.	- Facebook account; - Twitter account; - blog account; - other social media accounts (Youtube, Flickr, etc.); - text posted; - photo posted; - video files; - audio files.	- link to EU institutions to (European Commission, Europe Direct, etc.); - link to press sites; - link EU officials'websits; - link to civic agencies; - link to Member-State national bodies (national events); - link to citizen sites; - links to resource library; - links to partners; - links to Facebook; - links to Twitter.	- link to EY Facebook; - link to Twitter; - link to Wikipedia; - link to other social media tools; - link to well-known European bloggers; - tagging participants in EY photos or videos.

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Strategy of engaging/participation		*Strategy of mobilizing*	
Web 1.0 feature	Web 2.0 feature	Web 1.0 feature	Web 2.0 feature
- email content sharing; - audio streaming; - online polls; - online debates.	- content generation on EY issue; - EU citizens' personal video posts; - coproduction of photo albums of EY events; - online polls; - online vote; - games; - applications; - the digital identity of "a follower"; - blog subscription	- EY event participant sign-up; - "tell a friend"; - email sharing; - to share an event; - to share a debate.	- to like a social media post; - to share a social media post; - personal calendar of the EY campaign event; - to recommend a social media post to a friend; - online contest; - to create an account on the EY online platform; - to create an announcement for an event; - to invite friends to like a EY event.

Strategy of interacting	
Web 1.0 feature	Web 2.0 feature
- contact facility (email); - online forum discussion; - news commenting facility; - FQA.	- blog comments; - Facebook comments; - other social media comments; - to create a group; - live chat; - interactive games.

Table 1. Codebook for Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 strategies of e-communicating European Years

The research questions of our study are the following:
RQ1: What is the frequency of the five online strategies used in e-communicating EY 2013?
RQ2: What are the most used Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features for each online strategy?

Findings

The first research question focused on the way in which the strategies of informing, connecting, engaging, mobilizing, and interacting were implemented into the EY 2013 website and Facebook profile. As shown in Figure 1, the online strategies were differently used in the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments. The salience of the online strategies used on the EY 2013 official website was the following: connecting (32%), informing (26%), interacting (16%), mobilizing (13%) and engaging (13%). The salience of the online strategies used on the EY 2013 Facebook community profile was the following: mobilizing (57%), informing (35%), interacting (6%), connecting (1.5%), and engaging (0.5%).

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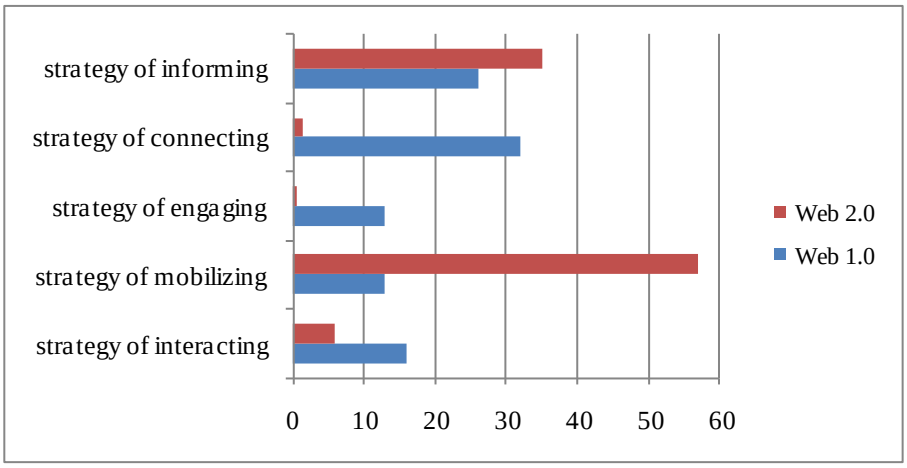


Figure 1. Frequency (%) of the online strategies used for the European Year of Citizens 2013
(on the official website and the Facebook community)

Whereas the Web 1.0 strategies did not reveal a great discrepancy of their use, the Web 2.0 strategies were mainly used to mobilize citizens and to inform about future or past events. It is interesting to observe that in both types of strategies, the strategy of informing is not the most salient one. In the case of Web 1.0 strategies, the connecting strategy prevails, whereas in the case of Web 2.0 strategies, mobilizing is the most salient one.

The second research question sought to determine the most salient Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features for each online strategy. *The strategy of informing* included visual elements as the most used feature. Both the EY 2013 official website and Facebook community profile included photographic images and advertising images to present past or future events meant to promote the European Year of Citizens. For example, in one month since its joining the Facebook (July 5), the EY 2013 Facebook profile has embedded 51 photographic images and 10 posters and EY logos. The greatest majority of posted items (n=22) focused on EY events that took place in Bulgaria.

The strategy of connecting included features which provide links to other organizations or community members. As shown in Figure 1, this strategy was the most salient one on the EY 2013 official website and it was almost absent on the Facebook profile. The Web 1.0 links included "digital bridges" towards other European institutions, to EU funding opportunities, to EU officials' websites (e.g., Viviane Reding), to EU citizens' rights and to Facebook and Twitter. The Facebook link did not direct the citizens/online participants to the EY 2013 Facebook profile, but to the European Commission Facebook profile.

The strategy of engaging was most salient in the Web 1.0 environment. Besides the online poll, the EY 2013 website included the section "Join the debate" where the European citizens were provided three possibilities of active online involvement: "Debate on the future of Europe", "Your voice in Europe", and "European citizens' initiative". This type of virtual empowerment of the European citizens constitutes a real improvement for the EU e-communication with its citizens.

The strategy of interacting has Web 1.0 discussion forums and Web 2.0 comments as main features. For example, from January 1 to August 1, 2013 the *Debating Europe platform*

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had 93 debate issues uploaded which were commented upon, the gay marriage being the most commented issue (n=390 comments). The most commented post (n=12) on the EY 2013 Facebook community profile was the event "My road to Spirit of Burgas 2013".

The strategy of mobilizing focused on features of liking and sharing. Whereas the likes are a sign of appreciating the Facebook profile (n=129 likes in one month), the shares are a means of inviting other online participants to take part in the offline events. It is the case of the event "My road to Spirit of Burgas 2013" promoted on Facebook which had 166 shares and was appreciated by 754 community members.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments used in promoting the European Year of Citizens showed that the EU bodies in charge with the promotion of European Years have become more aware of the fact that they should rethink the way of developing relationships with the European citizens.

The findings indicate that the EU bodies do not use the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments merely as means of open and transparent communication of their activities, but also as means of EU citizens' active engagement in debating and making proposals for initiatives. The analysis showed that the EY 2013 official website turned into a valuable network by providing various links to EU institutions and funding opportunities, whereas the EY 2013 Facebook community page became the proper environment of mobilizing EU citizens to take part in offline events and to appreciate past and future EY activities. The comparative analysis of the online strategies used on the website and Facebook highlighted that the social media tools have not been used at their full potential. We may mention two reasons to this lack of engaging European citizens on the Facebook community profile: (1) the Facebook link from the EY 2013 official website is not to the EY 2013 Facebook profile, but to the European Commission Facebook profile; (2) the EY 2013 Facebook community profile was created at the beginning of July and the greatest number of posts focus on the EY events from Bulgaria. Thus it is the possibility that the Facebook account was created by EU citizens from Bulgaria.

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