

Online engagement strategies for European institutions—A guideline

<http://eeurociti.fjsc.unibuc.ro/>

About the guideline

This guideline has two main triggers:

- on the one hand, the findings of the survey disseminated within the e-eurociti project;
- on the other hand, one of the actions mentioned by the European Commission, namely to achieve the goal of increasing citizens' participation in the democratic life of the EU. [1]



<https://pixabay.com/en/question-question-mark-help-2309040/>

Purposes of this guideline:

- to capture the diverse e-citizens' experience on the 'Debating Europe' platform
- to outline the dimensions of an effective (online) communication with e-citizens
- to outline the online dialogic communication dimensions
- to provide praxis-oriented suggestions for citizens' online engagement.

"Intensifying the Citizens' Dialogues and public debate, to exchange views with EU citizens and increase their understanding of what impact the Union has on their daily lives" (European Commission - Press release) [1]

Key concepts

Citizenship— a form of social agency. The citizen-agent is the foundation of the civic culture frame. [2]

- **Participatory citizen** actively partakes in "the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels". [3]
- **Justice oriented citizen** understands how to value and incorporate diverse and even opposing views when addressing the roots of social problems.[3]

Digital citizen—"practices conscientious use of technology, demonstrates responsible use of information, and maintains a good attitude for learning with technology". [4]

Engagement— the creation of online structures facilitating a two-way interaction between visitors (in our case, citizens) and organizations (in our case, European institutions).[5]

- **Empowerment**— the provision of tools that enable citizens to take actions on their own, independently of

the organization, without the organization tracking, managing, or even necessarily knowing about the actions. [5]

Online platforms— outlets "that are capable of facilitating direct interactions between users via online systems, and that capitalise on data-driven efficiencies enabled by network effects".[6]

Contents

About the guideline	1
Key concepts	1
Effective (online) communication with citizens	2
Lessons learned—Debating Europe platform	2
Online dialogic communication dimensions	3
Suggestions for citizens' online engagement	3
About e-eurociti	4
References	4

Effective (online) communication with citizens

Why target citizens?

As P. Dahlgren says, the civic culture frame is “interested in the process of becoming—how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development” (p. 153). [2]

Citizens are the target group of European institutions and the communication deficit may be stopped by providing a “bottom-up” approach.

“Communication is more than information” was mentioned in the 2005 *Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission* (p. 2). [7]

The International Association for Public Participation also highlights that information is just one of the four dimensions of citizen engagement (Figure 1).

Inform— to provide citizens with objective (online) information to assist them in under-

standing the problem, alternatives, opportunities, solutions

Consult— to obtain citizens’ (online) feedback on analyses, alternatives, decisions

Collaborate— to partner (online) with citizens in parts or all of decision-making

Empower— to place some of the final decision-making in the citizens’ hands.

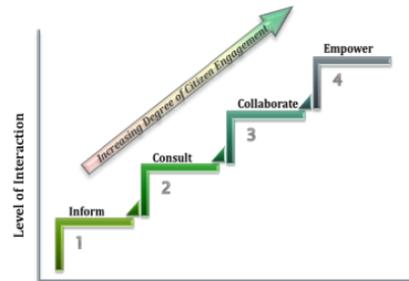


Figure 1. Dimensions of citizen engagement [8]

“To debate or not to debate on European issues?”

Priorities for 2017–19:
Promoting and enhancing citizens’ participation in the democratic life of the EU

The Commission will:

1. Intensify Citizens’ Dialogues and encourage public debates, to improve public understanding of the impact of the EU on citizens’ daily lives and to encourage an exchange of views with citizens.
2. Report in 2017 on the implementation of EU law on local elections to ensure that EU citizens can effectively exercise their voting rights at local level.
3. In 2018, promote best practices which help citizens vote and stand for EU elections, including on retaining the right to vote when moving to another Member State and cross-border access to political news, to support turnout and broad democratic participation in the perspective of the 2019 European elections⁶⁰.

EU Citizenship Report 2017 [1]

Lessons learned—Debating Europe platform

The e-eurociti team distributed a survey to the most active e-citizens on the ‘Debating Europe’ platform. More about the distribution procedure could be found at <http://eurociti.fjpsc.unibuc.ro/results>. Number of respondents - 115.

The results show the following aspects:

- **a scarce degree of a two-way communication:** the three most used actions of e-citizens’ participation on the DE platform focused on: posting comments (88%), answering other e-debaters’ comments (50%), and getting an answer from policy-makers or

experts (3%).

- **most appreciated tools to facilitate easy navigation:** titles of the debates, visibility (words in bold), navigation bars, search buttons.
- **aspects to maintain e-citizens’ interest:** debate issues, interaction with other persons from other countries, infographics, possibility of interaction with policy-makers, pictures.
- **the degree of sharing e-citizens’ opinion:** almost half of the respondents considered that the DE platform is open to sharing e-citizens’ opinions.

Other respondents considered that it is “one-sided and ignorant” or that it is “an under-cover tool of certain pro EU interest to reach citizens”.

- **a scarce interaction:** 91% of the respondents declared that the DE platform did not let them know whether their comments served as topics for other debates. The interaction was more among e-citizens (52%), and not between debaters and policy-makers (8%) or experts (7%). 54% of the respondents consider that the debates in which they took part have a low influence upon the EU policymakers.



<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/>

Online dialogic communication dimensions

Openness, involvement and dialogue are the key concepts for digital citizenship.

These three aspects should be in close connection to the online dimensions of dialogic communication [9] related to online platforms.

EXPLORATION embeds two steps:

- **orientation**: one of the most concerns of an online platform usability. It refers to the ease of the platform interface, to the degree of confusion assigned to the navigation on the platform.

- **engagement**: it refers to the online platform's attempts to create a dialogic loop (to build and maintain relationships with e-citizens). It includes five relationship dimensions:
 - **trust**—the degree e-citizens' belief that the platform is objective and unbiased;
 - **commitment**—the degree of maintaining a relationship with e-citizens;
 - **involvement**—the degree the online platform is willing to devote itself to build a relationship.
- **openness**—the degree the online platform is open to share information and e-citizens' opinions;
- **dialogue**—the degree the online platform is interested in providing a two-way communication.

GENERATION OF RETURN VISITS refers to the inclusion of online elements which make return visits desirable by e-citizens. As a consequence, the online platform will be able to **conserve visitors** (e-citizens).

“A dialogic loop allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems ”

(Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326)

Suggestions for citizens' online engagement

The suggestions below comprise the tools mentioned in the literature [9] and the most active e-citizens' comments on the survey distributed through the e-eurociti project (see page 2).

ORIENTATION

- visible topic titles (bold, short, easy to read)
- navigation bars
- search buttons
- working links grouped in thematic categories
- link towards the follow-up of a consultation process (transparency of the decision-making process)

ENGAGEMENT

Trust dimension

- history & background of the online platform, (its founders etc.)
- values
- type of online platform (national, European, international)
- annual reports
- a prevalence of objective content (a cognitive persuasion strategy)
- the use of various sources for arguments for or against an issue

Commitment dimension

- citizen-oriented - comment & reply button
- constant updates

- login button

Involvement dimension

- constant surveys (to find e-citizens' issue interests)
- 'how to express your opinion' button
- downloadable materials (infographics, documents, videos)

Openness dimension

- 'to suggest a hot issue' button
- 'comment & reply' button
- a thematic structure of issues under debate/ consultation

Dialogue dimension

- general contact information (email, phone etc.)

- European policy-makers'/ experts' contact information (email, phone etc.)

- opportunity to vote on issues
- interactive posts
- constant feedback from European authorities
- allowance of critical thinking
- avoidance of biased issues

GENERATION OF RETURN VISITS

- calendar of issues under debate/ consultation etc.
- question & answer live sessions with European authorities
- various membership awards (for the most engaged e-citizens, for the highest level of interaction etc.)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-0599.

About e-eurociti

The aim of this project was to study the efficiency of the 'Debating Europe' platform as a transnational communicative space, the project team will compare the degrees of engagement of European citizens and EU policymakers along three dimensions:

- (a) across seven debate strands (Future, Asia&Europe, Global, Greener, Quality, Security, Smarter);
- (b) across countries (the countries with the most active online citizens);
- (c) over time (2011-2017).

Besides the descriptive and explanatory objectives, the e-eurociti members wanted to assess further developments of a networking Europe through mobilizing and engaging more European citizens and EU policymakers.

<http://eeurociti.fjsc.unibuc.ro/>

References

- [1] *EU citizenship report 2017*—http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-118_en.htm. Retrieved July 11, 2017.
- [2] Dahlgren, P. (2003). Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu. In J. Corner & D. Pels (Eds.) *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (pp. 151-170). London: Sage.
- [2] Dahlgren, P. (2005) The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22:2, 147-162.
- [3] Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269.
- [4] ISTE (2007). *National Educational Technology Standards and Performance Indicators for Students*. Retrieved November 23, 2016 from http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForStudents/2007Standards/NETS_for_Students_2007_Standards.pdf.
- [5] This definition was adapted from Foot, K.A., Schneider, S.M. (2006). *Web Campaigning*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press.
- [6] <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/communication-online-platforms-and-digital-single-market-opportunities-and-challenges-europe>. Retrieved June 20, 2017.
- [7] *Communication to the Commission. 2005. Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission*. European Commission. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/pdf/communication_com_en.pdf. Retrieved July 12, 2011).
- [8] *International Association for Public Participation*. <https://www.iap2.org/>, apud <https://consultations.worldbank.org/Data/hub/files/consultation-template/engaging-citizens-improved-resultsopenconsultationtemplate/materials/finalstrategicframeworkforce.pdf>. Retrieved June 20, 2017.
- [9] The literature used for the two sections on page 3 was the following:
Vorvoreanu, M. (2008). *Web site public relations: How corporations build and maintain relationships online*. Cambria Press.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, 24, 321-334