



## ***Europeanisation of the electronic public sphere: Theory, institutional culture and online reality***

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*This article, based on the author's doctoral thesis (Michailidou 2007), focuses on the vertical Europeanisation of the online public debate and more specifically on the European Union's (EU) online public communication strategy, which is understood here as the top-down process of the unmediated, direct, online communication between the EU and the general public. The theoretical framework of this article is built on two scholarly theoretical debates which have been developing in parallel over the past 10-15 years: The potential democratising impact of the Internet on politics and the conceptual association of the European public sphere with the EU's democratic deficit. The findings show that over the past few years the European Commission has unambiguously committed to facilitate direct communication with EU citizens as part of the strategy to increase transparency and democratic legitimation of the EU's decision-making process, while the Internet is seen as a key tool in facilitating direct communication with the public. However, after monitoring three of the EU's official websites for a year and analyzing the views of 221 Internet users on the EU's Information and Communication strategy online, it has become evident that the Commission has not yet fulfilled these commitments. Furthermore, the interviews with key Commission officials have revealed that behind this gap between policy and online implementation lays an institutional culture which conflicts with the aims of the Commission's public communication strategy.*

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## Introduction

The concept of the European public sphere has been the subject of several scholarly works over the past few years (Eriksen and Fossum 2002; Meyer 2005; Schlesinger 2003).<sup>1</sup> As far as the nature of such a public sphere is concerned, authors' views are divided in more than one aspect: Not only do scholars disagree on whether there is one European public sphere or several, but the very existence of such a public sphere is also contested. Furthermore, academics disagree on who the participants of the European public sphere(s) are (elites vs general public) and whether cultural and linguistic diversity and national identities constitute a serious obstacle or an advantage in the construction of a European public sphere.

The interest of this academic debate is two-fold: Not only does it address the issue of European identity, as a political concept, but it also associates the European public sphere with the democratic deficit of the EU, thus linking public dialogue between citizens and European institutions with the accountability, transparency and democratic legitimacy of the latter.<sup>2</sup> In fact, for most authors, the argument that the EU institutions and decision-making process lack democratic legitimacy is a given, although there is no consensus on whether the EU's democratic deficit is the cause or result of an absent/deficient European public sphere.<sup>3</sup> A first step towards democratic legitimation is to establish a public dialogue between the

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<sup>1</sup> See also de Beus 2002; Koopmans et al 2002; Kunelius and Sparks 2001; Meyer 1999; Scharpf 1999; Schlesinger 1999; van de Steeg 2002; Weiler et al 2003; Weiler 1999; Weiler 1996.

<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that all scholars accept a causal relation between the EU's democratic deficit and the limited mandate or absence of the European public sphere. Similarly not all authors accept that the EU institutions lack legitimacy or that it is necessary to increase the transparency of the EU decision-making process. See for example de Beus 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Kantner 2002; Kevin 2001; Koopmans et al 2004; Kunelius and Sparks 2001; Risse and van de Steeg, 2003; Trenz 2004; Waldenström 2002; Weiler 1996.

decision-making institutions and the public, with the latter's feedback incorporated in the decision-making process.

This comes at a time when the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions is questioned by an increasing number of EU citizens, as the series of negative referenda over EU treaties in several member states illustrate, with the most recent being the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French and Dutch publics in 2005. Moreover, Eurobarometer surveys constantly highlight the gap between public opinion and EU policy as far as the future of the EU is concerned (Eurobarometer 2006a, Eurobarometer 2006b).

Besides the issue of democratic legitimacy, the Union is currently also facing an identity crisis: the candidacy of Turkey as an EU member has sparked numerous and lengthy debates, nationally and on EU level, about the geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe. The matter of 'what Europe is all about' became yet more pressing in early 2006, after the publication by the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed sparked violent protests by Muslims throughout the world. This in turn saw one of the most intense cultural debates unfold simultaneously in all European member states: public opinion appeared divided between those who view freedom of speech as a defining element of European culture and those who argue in favour of a more self-censored, and therefore more culturally accommodating, multi-ethnic European society.

At the same time, the EU's 'single voice' has often been deemed politically weak, during international crises, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the 'War on Terror', the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict and most recently, Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the case of third-country secret services abducting and illegally interrogating individuals on EU ground (for example, Schlesinger, 2003 on the case of Iraq). These cases have highlighted a weakness of the Union as a collective polity to consistently and effectively promote and defend its core values of democracy and peace both domestically and internationally.

With the number of the EU member-states having risen to twenty-seven in January 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria joined the Union, defining the identity of the EU and bridging the gap between public opinion and EU policy regarding the role and aims of the Union are vital if the future of this polity is to be safeguarded. And this is why the debate regarding the European public sphere is so important. Who are the participants in the debate regarding the identity, values and future of the Union- is it an elite public sphere or is it open to the general public as well? More crucially, is there any evidence that this identity and legitimacy crisis has finally led to a dialogue of substance between the EU decision-making elites, particularly the Commission (the EU's official voice), and the general public?

The present paper focuses, in particular, on the official EU strategy of communication with the general public (EU public communication strategy) and its role in the emerging online European public sphere. After a brief presentation of this paper's theoretical concept, which establishes the relation between the EU's public communication, the Internet and the European public sphere, this issue is

addressed in four stages, namely: from the perspective of the EU's public communication policy-making (Commission information and communication documents); the online implementation of the public communication policy (official EU websites' analysis); the institutional culture behind the policy-making and its online implementation (interviews with key senior Commission officials); and the impact of the online public communication policy on key Internet audiences (EU websites' online user survey).

### **European public sphere & online EU public communication: Theoretical framework**

Before proceeding with the definition of the European public sphere and of the online EU public communication it is necessary to clarify the concept of the public sphere in general and the role of the Internet in it. The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the Habermasian normative approach of the public sphere (Habermas 1996; Habermas 1989) as one which a) potentially everyone has access to and no one enters into discourse with an advantage over another (who); b) is a realm in which individuals gather to participate in open discussions (how); and c) has the potential to be a foundation for a critique of a society based on democratic principles (what) (Michailidou 2007).<sup>4</sup>

Openness and inclusiveness are also core elements of the online public sphere. The medium's key characteristics of identity fluidity (Jordan 2000; Poster 1995), ability to bypass communication obstacles (Gilmore cited in Jordan 2000), elimination of geographical and time-related barriers (Yang 2002) and virtually

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<sup>4</sup> These generic qualities were adapted from Holub's view of the Habermasian public sphere (Holub 1991) and of course, as Holub points out, they are subject to both the historical context within which a public sphere is examined and on the topics that are admitted for discussion (ibid.).

endless flow of information<sup>5</sup> have led several theorists to argue in favour of the democratising potential of the medium (Coleman and Götze 2001; Smith 2004) and envisage an all-inclusive online public sphere, based on the Habermasian normative model (Jordan 2000; Poster 2003).<sup>6</sup>

The core elements of the Habermasian normative approach of the public sphere are also found in several scholarly works on the European public sphere. This paper draws from two approaches in particular in order to define the European public sphere: The “Europeanised national public spheres” concept (e.g. Pfetsch 2004) and the definition of “transnational public spheres” (Guidry et al 2000) according to which a transnational public sphere is

*“a space in which both residents of distinct places (states or localities) and members of transnational entities (organizations or firms) elaborate discourse and practices whose consumption moves beyond national boundaries” (Guidry et al 2000: 6).*

Combining these two approaches allows for the ethno-cultural differences among the various member-states’ public spheres to be taken into consideration, as well as the existence of transnational organisations and lobbies, whose interests stretch across the member states’ national borders and who play a key role in the EU’s decision-making process (participants’ parameter of the Habermasian public sphere model-“**who**”). At the same time, such an approach can also incorporate the argument that in the case of the EU the participants in this transnational public sphere do share a history and certain values, as Weiler has pointed out (Weiler 1999; Weiler 1996), as well as a political system of co-decided, supra-national

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<sup>5</sup> This flow of information is often interrupted by censorship of various degrees. However, another of the Internet’s core characteristics is that it was designed to override any obstacle in communication. Online censorship, therefore, regardless of its severity, is bound to be temporary.

<sup>6</sup> For the counter-argument to this approach see, for example, Hill and Hughes 1998 ; Hibberd et al 2003.

policies. The outcome of such a public sphere (“what” parameter) is not actually predetermined in this definition, although the democratisation of the EU decision-making process would be a desired outcome (Michailidou 2007). What is defined, though, is the way that public dialogue happens (the process parameter-“how”): Through “elaborate discourse”, in other words through rational-critical debate, also a fundamental element of the Habermasian model of the public sphere (ibid.).

Consequently, by using this combined definition of the European public sphere, the link with the Habermasian normative model of the public sphere is established: Because of the particularities of the EU decision-making system, transparency and accountability are crucial. If these are to be achieved, an all-inclusive and democratic European public sphere is necessary (the Habermasian all-inclusive public sphere). In addition, this European public sphere is not homogeneous, but consists of several, interrelated national public spheres, the participants of which have not necessarily developed a European collective consciousness (Michailidou 2007).

Evidence of the emergence of a European public sphere has usually been sought within the national public discourses of the EU member-states, which are mediated by national conventional mass media, such as the press and television (Koopmans et al 2004).<sup>7</sup> Examining the emerging European public sphere from such a perspective has provided valuable data on the level of Europeanisation of national public political discourses (i.e. the level of reporting and debating of EU issues within national public spheres) and on the level of interconnectedness of the

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<sup>7</sup> See also Kevin 2001; Koopmans and Pfetsch 2003; Meyer 2005; Pfetsch 2004; Rauer et al 2002; Trenz 2004.

national public spheres (common reference framework of shared European values, networks among national actors). In other words, this approach of analysis of the emerging European public sphere has offered empirical data on the 'horizontal' (Pfetsch 2004: 4) process of the Europeanisation of the national public spheres.

However, the role of the EU institutions as both actors of this public sphere and facilitators of the public debate has largely been unexplored (with the exception of Meyer 1999; Ward 2002; Schlesinger 2003). In order to observe the degree of interaction between the EU institutions and the public in the member states, i.e. the 'vertical' (Pfetsch 2004: 4) Europeanisation of the public dialogue, one needs to move beyond the fora of national/regional public debates, as these are moderated by national/regional media, which intercede any official EU input and frame the debate within the context of regional/national reference values.

In this context, the present paper focuses on the EU's public communication strategy, which is understood here as the top-down process (i.e. the official EU strategy of communication with the general public) of the vertical Europeanisation of the public dialogue. More specifically, the EU's public communication is understood here as aiming to increase people's familiarity with the EU; increase people's appreciation of what the EU does; and engage people with the EU/ in the debate of EU affairs (Michailidou 2007 based on definition of public diplomacy by Leonard et al 2002).

In order for these aims to be achieved, the EU's public communication needs to be more than a one-dimensional process of delivering messages (ibid.). Interaction



between the EU institutions and the general public is the first step towards public communication instead of public information. Successful public communication, i.e. successful interaction, also requires an understanding of the target audience/s and the ability of the EU to prove the relevance of its policies to them (ibid.).

Additionally, if the EU public communication strategy is to move beyond political marketing and contribute to the elimination of the EU's democratic deficit, it needs to encourage not just interaction with the public, but a Habermasian model of public dialogue, i.e. an all-inclusive public sphere, where critical debate functions as a safeguard of the democratic process (Habermas 1996; Habermas 1989).

Given the complicated nature of the European public sphere (interconnected national public spheres, multilingual community, geographical distance between members of the public), the Internet becomes an attractive tool, which could be deployed towards the formation of a democratic, strong European public sphere (Engström 2002; Leonard and Arbuthnott 2001). Figure 1 (Annex: 30) summarises the theoretical concept of this paper.

In the following pages this theoretical concept is juxtaposed with the empirical data collected through the analytical review of the EU's Information and Communication strategy documents, the monitoring of three official EU websites and an online EU websites' user survey.

## **EU public communication online: The policy**

The EU online public communication strategy forms part of the wider EU Information and Communication strategy, for which the Commission of the European Communities (Commission) is responsible. In order to identify the aims of the Commission with regard to the EU's online public communication strategy, the Commission documents concerning the Information and Communication strategy for the EU from 2001 (when the first such document was produced) onwards were reviewed.<sup>8</sup> This review aimed to obtain the Commission's official position on the role of the EU's public communication in the European public sphere and in addressing the EU's democratic deficit, through the deployment of the Internet.

The documents were divided into two groups, in order to reflect the change in the College of Commissioners in late 2004, when the Barroso Commission took over from the Prodi Commission. This change signified the beginning of a new era for the EU's public communication strategy as for the first time a separate Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM) was created and one of the Commission's Vice-Presidents, Margot Wallström, was appointed Commissioner for Communication.

What became evident through the analysis of the documents was that the Commission had been aware of the issues regarding the emerging European public sphere and the openness, accountability and democratic legitimation of the EU institutions. However, the focus on these issues became clearer after 2005,

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<sup>8</sup>COM(2001)354, final; COM(2001)428, final; COM(2002)350, final/2; COM(2002)705, final; COM(2004)196, final; COM(2005)494, final; COM(2006)211, final; COM(2006)212; COM(2006)35; Commission of the European Communities, 2005.

when the new, DG COMM, documents started being produced. Furthermore, the ‘Wallström-era’ documents are undoubtedly more communication oriented than those produced during the Prodi Commission period.

More specifically, throughout its 2001-2006 Information and Communication documents, the Commission has consistently declared its intention to establish a two-way communication process with the European public, in order to offer more opportunities for citizens’ participation in the decision-making process, gain the trust of the public towards the EU institutions, and encourage the public debate on European issues.

Furthermore, the Commission has continuously expressed its commitment to a more coherent and clear communication to the European public of what the EU stands for and what the EU’s goals and achievements are, particularly after 2004, when the Commission also recognised the need for public debate of the issues that are of more concern to the EU public. Insofar as the Internet is concerned, the Commission has emphasised, mainly after 2004, the role of the Internet as an integral part of the EU’s public communication strategy, predominantly as a means for increased transparency, public dialogue and accountability.

The Commission has also maintained coherence and consistency of the values it proposes as core EU values throughout the documents, i.e. peace, prosperity and democracy (Figure 2, Annex: 31), despite other changes introduced in the proposed Information and Communication strategy plans.

The consistency in the values projected and in its basic commitments with regard to the EU's public communication strategy notwithstanding, there are several problems with the Commission's proposals on paper: To begin with, it is not always clear if the Commission is referring to EU member-states and their citizens only, or to the wider European community, thus sending confusing messages to the reader.

Moreover, the Commission recognises that the EU public is questioning the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions yet never really goes beyond merely acknowledging the existence of this argument. In fact, most of the documents examined dismiss, albeit rather tactfully, the claims that the EU has a democratic deficit. Not accepting the lack of democratic legitimation of the EU institutions undermines the Commission's emphasis on citizens' participation in the decision-making process and on further openness of the EU institutions' procedures. It is not clear whether the Commission intends to actually address the EU's democratic deficit by introducing new possibilities for the citizens to give feedback and monitor the decision-making procedures on EU level, or it aims to create the impression that the EU's democratic deficit is being addressed with these measures.

Finally, it is not always clear if it is the Commission's view that the Internet should be used to address a niche public, i.e. the European elites, more than it should be used to communicate with the general public, particularly in the documents produced before 2004.

EU public communication online: Policy implementation

Moving on to the implementation of the EU's Information and Communication strategy online, three of the EU's official websites (EUROPA<sup>9</sup>; EURUNION<sup>10</sup>; EU@UN<sup>11</sup>) were monitored for a period of twenty four weeks 2004-2005,<sup>12</sup> in order to determine if their homepage contents complied with the values and aims defined in the EU's information and communication strategy documents. The main points of the Commission's proposed information and communication strategy described above were used as a guide for analysis of three official EU websites.

What emerged from this analysis was a gap between policy and online implementation, particularly when it came to interaction and facilitation of public dialogue. Although the EU's messages online adhered to the key concepts that the Commission has consistently identified as core EU values throughout the Information and Communication strategy documents, when it came to implementing the Commission's commitment to enhancing public dialogue and encouraging the emergence of a European public sphere, interaction with EU officials was only available in the form of generic email addresses (Figure 3, Annex: 31). As a result, despite the Commission's commitment in all its EU Information and Communication documents, the Internet is not given a key role in enhancing and facilitating the public dialogue between EU institutions and the public.

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<sup>9</sup> The EU's official portal (Commission of the European Communities 2006b).

<sup>10</sup> The official website of the EU delegation in Washington, aimed at the American public (Commission of the European Communities 2006d).

<sup>11</sup> The official website of the EU Delegation in the United Nations, which was used here as a control website, since it is not aimed at the general public but at a niche audience (Commission of the European Communities 2006c).

<sup>12</sup> The monitoring took place for twelve weeks in 2004 and twelve weeks in 2005. During the period 13 March 2004 to 10 June 2004, **442** links were coded on the EUROPA homepage, **979** links on the EURUNION homepage and **609** links on the EU@UN homepage. During the period 3 May 2005 to 20 July 2005, there were **372** links found and coded on the EUROPA homepage, **1011** on the EURUNION one and **658** on the EU@UN homepage.

More specifically, online public dialogue in the form of discussion forum debates was recorded only in 2004, in two instances: the permanent online debate regarding EU issues on the EUROPA website (Futurum public forum) and the brief, temporary online discussion regarding mainly trade issues, which appeared on the EURUNION website for three weeks only. Although the number of participants in the temporary EURUNION forum was negligible, Futurum reached a total of 2343 contributions<sup>13</sup> to its two political debates regarding the EU's Constitutional Treaty by the end of the twelve-week monitoring period in 2004. Conversely, in 2005 the Futurum discussion forum was suspended, in the height of the debate regarding the future of Europe and the Constitutional Treaty.

Besides this, the analysis of the websites' homepage contents found that the EU's online public communication focuses on politics more than financial and social issues, as Table 1 shows (Annex: 32). However, the latest Eurobarometer surveys show that social issues such as unemployment and social security concern Europeans the most, as the majority believes these issues have direct impact on their everyday life but that the EU is not doing enough in these areas (Eurobarometer 2006a; Eurobarometer 2006b). The Commission has also identified such social issues as 'priority' ones in most of its EU Information and Communication documents. In that respect, the EU's online public communication

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<sup>13</sup> This number does not include contributions from EU officials, which were clearly indicated on the forum by stating the name of the official and his/her position. The instances when EU officials eponymously contributed to the online debate were very few and had the form of either a written contribution or a live online question-and-answer session with members of the public, which was publicised on the forum's webpage well in advance. It is not possible to determine how many (if any) of the contributions made by members of the public were indeed made by EU officials anonymously.

is failing to meet the Commission's aim to match its messages to the public's priorities.

After this study was completed, the Commission launched a new online discussion forum on EUROPA, entitled 'Debate Europe' (Commission of the European Communities 2006a), in March 2006. This forum is proving to be far more popular than its predecessor, Futurum, as within six months of its operation it received one million hits and contributions stood at 21554 on 3 August 2007 (ibid.).

Nevertheless, this action has not been followed by a formal framework outlining the ways in which the public's feedback will be incorporated in the decision-making process, nor has the consultation process preceding the adoption of legislation (Comitology) been opened up or made available online.

It is clear from the above that the EU's Information and Communication strategy is not fully implemented online. Figure 4 (Annex: 32) illustrates the discrepancy between the core concept of the EU's public communication strategy in paper and its online implementation, while further study is required in the future in order to assess the success of the Commission's latest actions in the field.

EU public communication online: Policy impact on key online audiences

Having established a gap between the EU's public communication policy and its implementation online, the third step was to investigate the impact of the EU's public communication online on what the Commission has invariably defined as

'key', 'priority' or 'silent majority' audiences, i.e. women and young people.<sup>14</sup>

Although the earlier documents do not explain how the Commission has reached the conclusion that young people and women are 'priority' audiences, documents produced after 2005 quote the results of the special Eurobarometer surveys on the Future of Europe (Eurobarometer 2006a; Eurobarometer 2006b) and of the contributions received on the 'Debate Europe' online forum. Based on the Eurobarometer findings, it appears that young people and women remain most sceptical about the EU while women are also less likely to participate in an online debate.

Furthermore, all Commission documents of the period 2001-2006 examined here emphasise the importance of maintaining and enhancing communication with specialist audiences, i.e. individuals who may already have a knowledge and/or interest in EU issues.

Although determining the gender or age of participants in online debates is quite difficult, since identity fluidity is one of the inherent characteristics of the online public sphere, as discussed earlier, young and educated individuals also fit the average Internet user's profile,<sup>15</sup> thus being amongst the individuals most likely to access the official EU websites and/or participate in an online debate. More specifically, in the case of the EU25, students are proportionally the most regular

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, COM(2001)354, final; COM(2002)350, final/2; COM(2004)196, final; COM(2005)494, final; COM(2006)212, final, SEC(2006)1553.

<sup>15</sup> The statistics available so far all present the average Internet user as middle or upper-class white male, in his late twenties and thirties, with higher education, living in Western Europe or North America (ClickZ Network 2006a; ClickZ Stats 2006b; Chen and Wellman 2003; Greenspan 2003; Lucas and Sylla 2003; Nielsen/Net Ratings 2003; Castells 2000). However, according to the latest evidence, the gap between the rich and the poor (individuals as well as countries) and between the two sexes, as far as their representation online is concerned, is steadily being reduced (ClickZ Network 2006a; ClickZ Stats 2006b; Chen and Wellman 2003; Nielsen/Net Ratings 2003).



users of the Internet (78 per cent of total number of individuals), while in terms of access any disparities are more due to lack of interest for the medium (45 per cent of EU27 citizens) than to socio-economic inequalities (25 per cent of EU27 citizens), according to the latest statistics (Ottens 2006: 3; Eurobarometer 2007: 15-24).

In this context, a survey was conducted over a period of four months (October 2005-January 2006) among 221 Internet users, comprising twenty seven questions, both closed-response and open-end. The sample chosen was a non-probability, 'snowball' type sample (Deacon et al 1999). An all-inclusive online survey sample was not feasible for practical reasons, i.e. the methodological problems of calculating a representative sample out of the world-wide Internet population that would also be representative of offline demographic groups and the enormity of the financial and time-related costs that would arise from pursuing an online survey on such a scale. Therefore, a small, specialised sample that would include individuals who would statistically be more likely to have visited EU official websites and/or online discussion forums (EU or non-EU alike) was deemed more appropriate. The individuals contacted regarding the survey were chosen on the basis of the following categories:

- Whether they were EU specialists/ had a professional interest in EU issues or non-EU specialists/ had no professional interest in EU issues.
- Whether they had a Pro-EU, EU-neutral or anti-EU stance.

This distinction was necessary in order to obtain as balanced an outcome as possible. In addition to these criteria, an email address was a prerequisite for an individual to be included in the sample.

Although the survey sought to include individuals of as many nationalities as possible, it was not always possible to identify the country of origin of a weblog editor or the nationality of an individual acting as a contact person on behalf of an organisation. Furthermore, email addresses did not always correspond to an individual but were generic contact addresses for the entire organisation. Consequently, it was sometimes difficult to classify the potential individual respondent under a certain category in advance. Nevertheless, the end results were positively affected by this, as the respondents' background emerged more varied than originally anticipated.

More specifically, 72 per cent of the respondents were 20-34 years of age, 82 per cent in academic or other professional/managerial positions, 92 per cent were of EU or EU-related/acceding countries and 86 per cent held a university degree. An unexpected 11 per cent of the respondents were either economically inactive or employed in manual/skilled labour and did not fit the profile of economically affluent and/or highly educated Internet users.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, cross-tabulations revealed that these respondents were among the most proactive in terms of accessing political websites and online forums regarding EU issues.

Overall, gender, education, nationality and age were statistically found to have no effect on the respondents' views on the EU websites and the role of the Internet in eliminating the EU's democratic deficit. The majority of the respondents were

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<sup>16</sup> Respondents were asked to determine their level of education choosing among six categories (non completed compulsory education; completed compulsory education; vocational qualification; BA; MA; PhD) and their work position (open-end question; answers were re-grouped under Public Officials EU ; Public Officials Non-EU ; IT; Professional/Managerial ; Skilled Manual/Manual; Unemployed/ Economically inactive; Education Professionals; Education: Students; Health. Data was then cross-tabulated in order to determine correlation between education and occupation.

frequent Internet users (96 per cent access the Internet every day), who also visit political/governmental websites on a regular basis (83 per cent of the respondents) with 70 per cent of the male and 39 per cent of the female respondents claiming to access such websites frequently. Of the 221 respondents, 97 claimed that they access online discussion forums frequently, with the majority of those (38 per cent) preferring political public forums.

Nevertheless, the frequency with which the interviewees normally access EUROPA, the EU's main portal, is very low: On a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Every day), the average frequency with which the respondents access EUROPA was 2.7 degrees. For EURUNION and EU@UN frequency of access was very *poor* barely averaging 1 degree. Although the result is not surprising for EU@UN, as it is a specialist website and was only used as control website in the survey, as far as EUROPA is concerned the results are disappointing considering this website is the EU's official voice online and meant to address as wide an audience as possible. If further contrasted with the 40.3 per cent of all respondents who confirmed that they access other EU websites except for EUROPA, EU@UN and EURUNION and the 19 per cent who access weblogs regarding EU issues, these ratings for EUROPA are particularly poor.

When asked to evaluate the three websites in terms of quality of information and accessibility, the respondents gave all three websites mediocre ratings. EUROPA received the highest ratings, with the respondents giving it an average 3.4 rating on a scale of 1 (poor quality) to 5 (excellent quality) as far as the information provided is concerned. Both of the other two websites got average ratings of 2.8,

for quality of information, while all three websites scored quite low with respondents as far as accessibility is concerned, with their average rankings not going over 2.9. Further analysis of the data showed that 57 per cent of the respondents based their evaluation on the degree of accessibility of the websites; 41 per cent on how interesting the content of the websites was; 16 per cent on the clarity of the message; 14 per cent on how credible they thought the source to be; and 7 per cent on whether the contents had any relevance to them.

The survey results further highlighted the poor implementation of the strategy online, in terms of the Commission's commitment to deploy the Internet in its efforts to engage in dialogue with the public and support the emerging European public sphere. Only 29 per cent of the respondents thought EUROPA provided adequate opportunities for interaction with EU officials, while for EURUNION and EU@UN the percentage dropped to a very poor 2.3 per cent and 5 per cent respectively.

In terms of the Commission acknowledging, albeit reluctantly, the EU's democratic deficit in all its EU public communication documents, associating this with the need for increased accessibility, transparency, accountability and two-way communication with the public and giving the Internet a central role in the implementation of the EU's Information and Communication strategy, the survey results show that the Commission is moving in the right direction. More specifically, 96 per cent of the respondents agreed that there is a democratic deficit within the EU institutions. 56 per cent thought the Internet can play a productive role in

eliminating this deficit as opposed to 40 per cent (eighty eight out of 221 respondents) who disagreed with this statement.

Those who thought the Internet can have a productive role in eliminating the EU's democratic deficit based their answer, in their majority, on the following points: 43 respondents found that the Internet increased accessibility of information, which allows citizens to make more informed decisions in relation to EU issues. 27 respondents expressed the view that the Internet increases accountability of the EU institutions by enabling people to contact the EU institutions/ officials quickly and cheaply as well as by establishing more direct forms of democracy, such as e-governance, e-voting and participation in the decision-making process. Fewer respondents mentioned the possibility that the Internet offers for public dialogue (with or without the participation of the EU institutions/ officials) which can in turn lead to public pressure on the EU institutions for further democratisation of their structures and processes (19 respondents); while for 13 respondents the Internet is seen as a medium which prevents institutions from functioning in secrecy, either because information is circulated via alternative routes or because the institutions themselves choose to make part or the whole of their decision-making process open to the public.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the majority of the respondents who did not agree with the statement that the Internet can help towards eliminating the EU's democratic deficit based their view mainly on the Internet-access argument, i.e. the gap between Internet-haves and Internet-have-nots. These survey results concerning the role of

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<sup>17</sup> Another 25 respondents did not explain further why they thought the Internet can help eliminate the EU's democratic deficit.

the Internet in the democratisation of the EU are very close not only to the Commission's official public communication strategy but also to the theoretical concept discussed in the beginning of this paper. Openness, transparency and widened participation in the decision-making process are seen by several scholars as viable possibilities which the Internet offers because of its core characteristics of identity fluidity, endless flow of information and ability to override censorship and physical space and time barriers.

The issue of access also features in both the theoretical debate and the survey results. Similarly to the theorists who point to offline socio-economic inequalities functioning as barriers to a truly all-inclusive online public sphere, a significant number of respondents also pointed to inequalities in access as the main factor blocking the Internet's potential to help eliminate the EU's democratic deficit. Furthermore, the online EU websites' user survey helped to further highlight the gap between the EU's official online public communication strategy and the way this is implemented, particularly insofar as its main official portal, EUROPA, is concerned. Nevertheless, neither the survey nor the EU websites' analysis that preceded it produced any evidence of the reasons behind this gap between policy and online implementation. For this reason, interviews with EU officials were conducted in order to obtain an insight into the institutional culture behind the designing and implementation of the EU's public communication strategy.

EU public communication online: The view of the policy-makers

For the purposes of this study, six interviews were conducted with senior Commission officials in key EU Information and Communication policy-making and

policy-implementation positions within the DG Communication and the EU Delegation in Washington, DC. The interviews were conducted in three stages, coinciding with the three stages of empirical data collection for this project (EU Information and Communication document analysis, EU websites' analysis and online survey of key audiences).<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an insight into what EU officials actually hope and try to achieve through the EU's websites as well as gain a greater understanding of the institutional culture towards the role of the Internet in the EU's public communication in general. Furthermore, the interviews aimed to obtain the Commission officials' views on the issue of the EU's democratic deficit and the role of the EU's public communication strategy in the emerging European public sphere.

What emerged from these interviews is that the gap between policy and implementation, insofar as the EU's online public communication strategy is concerned, can be attributed to two factors: practical/technical obstacles and a contradictory institutional culture within the Commission. More specifically, the DG Communication has undergone four restructures since 2001, a process which all interviewees agreed has disrupted the implementation of the Information and Communication strategy. Furthermore, the officials working on the EU's Information and Communication strategy are in their majority *"non-experts in the*

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<sup>18</sup>Four of the interviewees were senior officials in the Commission's Directorate-General Communication, one was a senior official responsible for communication in the Commission's Directorate General External Relations and one held a communication and information position in the European Commission Delegation Washington D.C., US. The interviews were conducted in "semi-structured" (Deacon et al 1999) format. Because of the senior positions held by the interviewees, they are not identified here by name. Where they are directly quoted in this paper, they are identified as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, etc.

*field of public communication*” as one interviewee put it, while another one further explained that *“hiring communication experts is not an option”* as there is the danger of the Commission being accused of creating a propaganda machine. This partly lies beneath the very slow embrace of new communication technologies and in particular of the Internet in the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy, despite policy-makers constantly underlining in every EU Information and Communication document the importance of this medium in reaching target audiences.

As far as the institutional culture is concerned, there is a difference of opinion/perception between officials on policy-making level and officials who are charged with implementing the policy with regard to the aims, online target audiences and role of the Internet in the EU public communication strategy. On the one hand, the policy-makers firmly support the concept of target audiences, and feel strongly about the need to approach ‘difficult’ audiences, such as young people and women, online. According to Interviewee 1, for example, the Commission needs *‘to open up to young people, and women, because if you look at the statistics they are the ones that are harder to approach’*. Similarly, another respondent expressed the view that it is crucial to approach women and young people

*“because they are not key users already and because they have fewer professional incentives to visit the site and we believe they have the democratic right to be included and participate as well” (Interviewee 2).*

On the other hand, policy-implementation officials are of the opinion that the Internet is mainly a tool of communication with EU specialists and individuals and/or institutions with an interest in the EU and its actions. They are, therefore,



not convinced that approaching so-called 'vulnerable' target audiences, i.e. disinterested or sceptical audiences, is worth the effort or that it can be successful:

*'To be honest we think that this part of the site is mostly used by students who have to learn about the EU or people who are really interested. I am not really sure if our ambition can go any further than that' (Interviewee 3).*

*'We have found that women are the most sceptical when it comes to politics and the EU in particular, in opinion polls in Central Europe, also the more 'blue-collar' are (more sceptical) [...] so [...] we try to structure our communication around this. (But) we have to make a choice: Do we try to be defensive, or do we go to people who we think will react favourably? This is a debate that is going on at the moment' (Interviewee 5).*

Besides this, there is a reluctance within the Commission to take the lead from the member-states in the implementation of the EU's Information and Communication strategy, *'due to the fear that the Commission will be accused of propaganda and of attempting to countermand national sovereignty altogether'* (Interviewee 1).

Is it necessary to bridge the gap between policy, online implementation and public perception of the EU's online public communication strategy?

The empirical data presented above indicate that there is a gap between policy and online implementation, which is affecting the effectiveness of the EU's online public communication, insofar as the normative concept of public communication discussed in the beginning of this paper is concerned. More specifically, in terms of engaging people in the debate of EU affairs, the monitoring of the three EU websites and the online EU websites' user survey have shown that interaction opportunities on the official EU websites in the form of online debate are not sufficient, in terms of what the Commission itself has committed to provide online and what would be expected of the Commission according to the theoretical model discussed earlier in the paper.

Moreover, the three EU websites examined, particularly EUROPA, were found to fall short of not only the Commission's Information and Communication aims but also of the requirements and expectations of 'key audience' individuals who participated in the survey. In other words, individuals who fall under the umbrella of what the Commission has classified as 'priority' audiences, such as young and/or educated individuals, have rated the EU's main online communication portal (EUROPA) poorly in terms of its accessibility, quality of information and interest of content. At the same time, the survey data, in particular, indicate that Internet users who would fall under the Commission's classification of 'vulnerable' or 'priority' audiences, e.g. women, economically inactive population, are interested in EU issues and often access relevant online public forums. This in turn shows that there is a possibility of an emerging European public sphere online, from which the EU's official voice (vertical Europeanisation of online public debate) is absent.

Besides this, the results of this research project have shown that there are discrepancies not only between strategic planning and implementation of the EU public communication online, but also between policy and institutional culture. More importantly, all evidence points to the issue of political power within the EU, an issue which underpins the democratic deficit of the EU institutions.

Based on the interview material, political power distribution among EU institutions can be linked to the reluctance of the Commission to be seen as more proactive in the area of communication with the public, continuously leaving the initiatives to national and local governments, although by the interviewees' own admittance this

has not been an effective strategy in terms of getting the EU's messages across to the public so far. It is also directly linked to the lack of public communication experts within the relevant policy-making bodies, as the Commission would not want to be accused of *'hiring professionals to try and sell the EU to the public'*, as one interviewee put it. Besides this, the conflicting views between policy-making and policy-implementing EU officials regarding the role of the Internet in the EU's public communication strategy also indicate a power struggle within DG Communication between officials who see the Internet as a medium for reaching to specialised audiences only and those who want to deploy its potential in order to reach the wider public and particularly 'key' audiences.

In addition, the Commission does not approach the EU's democratic deficit in the same context as the European public does, i.e. the Commission in its public communication strategy documents and on EUROPA refers to the "perceived" EU democratic deficit, while nearly all respondents of the online survey acknowledge the EU's democratic deficit as real. The evidence, therefore, points to the fact that the Commission is far from achieving what Risse et al describe as *'similar horizon of reference'* (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003:19), that is, the top-down communication process within the European public sphere does not address issues within the same context as the public does. This is a prerequisite for a *'community of communication'* (ibid.:19) or the formation of a public sphere in which participants recognise each other as legitimate contributors in the public debate, precisely because they a priori agree on the same context framework. This is not to be confused with universal consensus over an issue: The official EU position on the democratic deficit may differ from that of the public, but they still

need to agree on a common framework, namely to agree that there is a democratic deficit, if they are to engage in a public dialogue between them.

Furthermore, the present study has shown that the Commission is failing to match messages to the public's priorities: At the moment, the latest Eurobarometer surveys show that the Europeans find that the EU is not doing enough to improve areas that they think have direct impact on their everyday life, such as unemployment and social security (Eurobarometer, 2006a; Eurobarometer, 2006b). The EU websites' analysis showed that the EU's online public communication focuses on politics more than financial and social issues. When we take into consideration the issues that the EU public has defined as priority ones, and that these issues do not really receive the appropriate coverage even by EUROPA, the EU's main portal, the reasons behind the negative evaluation that the three EU websites received in the survey conducted for the present study become more apparent. Not only were these websites difficult to navigate and offered little opportunities for interaction with EU officials, but they also, as it now transpires, failed to address effectively the issues that concern the EU public the most.

Public communication alone cannot resolve the issue of the democratic deficit of the EU institutions. This is more a matter of political will and consensus on behalf of the member-states than a technical or communication issue. However, within the normative theoretical framework of the European public sphere discussed earlier, what public communication can do is to create the prerequisites for an open political dialogue among member-states and ultimately a consensus as to the

political nature of the EU. Successful public communication is built on mutual trust between the institutions and the public. In turn, trust is developed through open dialogue, which allows direct input of public opinion in the policy-making process, and through openness on behalf of the institutions with regard to the issues that concern EU citizens most.

So far, the points concerning transparency, credibility of the message and achieving a '*similar horizon of reference*' (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003: 19) can be applied equally to the EU's public communication strategy online and offline. Nevertheless, the Internet is currently the only medium which allows the EU institutions/ the EU establishment, to engage in direct, unmediated public dialogue with the EU citizens. Unmediated public communication, i.e. which does not rely on national communicators (offline media) is crucial if the EU is to establish the credibility of its messages. Since the prospect of a widely-accepted supranational TV channel or newspaper is distant in the case of the EU, the only other public space where the EU establishment has the opportunity to directly approach the EU (and foreign) publics is cyberspace. Furthermore, the Internet also offers the possibility for interaction/dialogue with the public, as opposed to the less interactive nature of TV, radio and printed press.

Besides this, the online public sphere has the potential to become all-inclusive, as gender, age, socioeconomic and/or ethnic background, do not constitute eligibility factors in the online public sphere and, in Europe at least, statistics show that non-access to the Internet is more a matter of choice than the result of socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, some of the EU's priority target audiences (for example,

young Europeans) are also amongst the groups that access the Internet the most. In addition, as the data from the EU websites' online user survey has shown, online discussion forums are also used by individuals within what the EU calls 'vulnerable' groups (for example Eurobarometer 2006b), i.e. women and individuals who have not reached higher levels of education.

For all these reasons, the Internet constitutes an important public communication tool, which allows for the official EU voice to reach the public directly, bypassing national/regional media and participating in a potentially all-inclusive European public sphere. For the last six years the Commission has repeatedly expressed its commitment to promoting dialogue with the general public and has identified a key role for the Internet in this process. This study has shown, however, that since the launch of the first Commission Information and Communication policy proposal in 2001 little progress has been made in the implementation of these proposals.

At a time when the EU's identity and its role in Europe and the world are widely debated in traditional media, and recent developments within the Union have revealed a gap between the officials' vision of the EU and the public's needs and expectations, the EU institutions cannot afford to be excluded from the public sphere debating precisely their role and future. The launch of Debate Europe in 2006 has brought the Commission one step closer to the materialisation of vertical Europeanisation of the public dialogue. Whether or not the Commission will actually listen to what EU citizens want will determine whether the EU's public communication is moving towards a European public sphere or just a European sphere of publicity.

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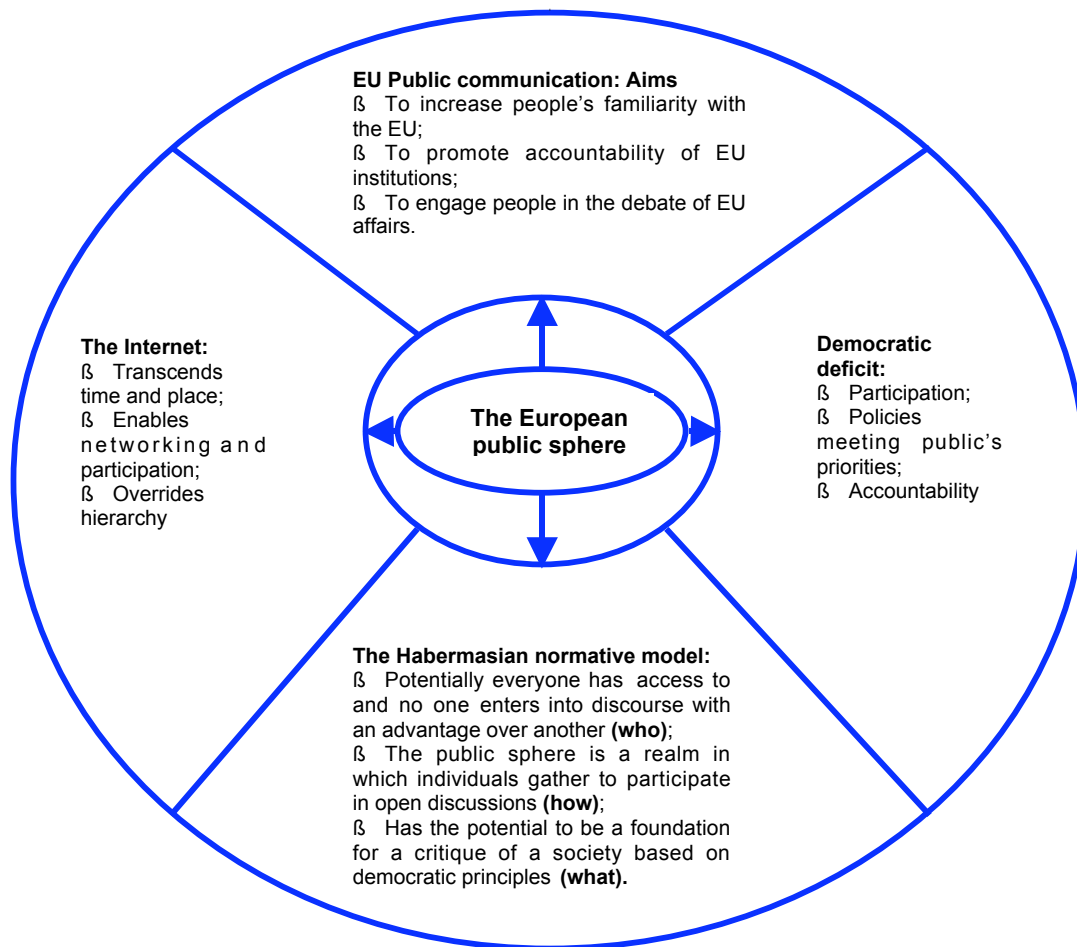
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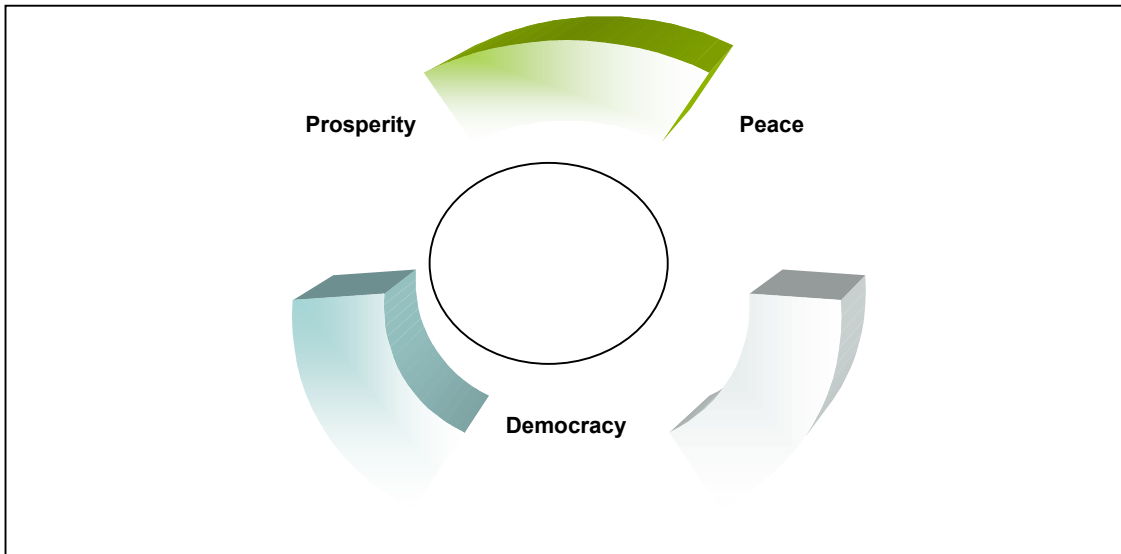
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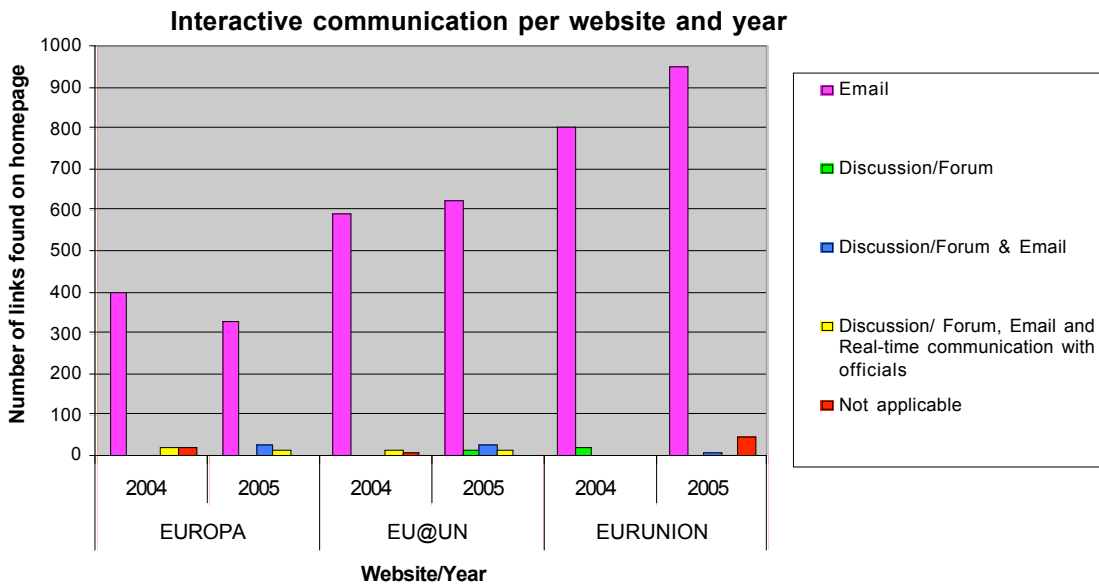
## Annex: Figures and Tables



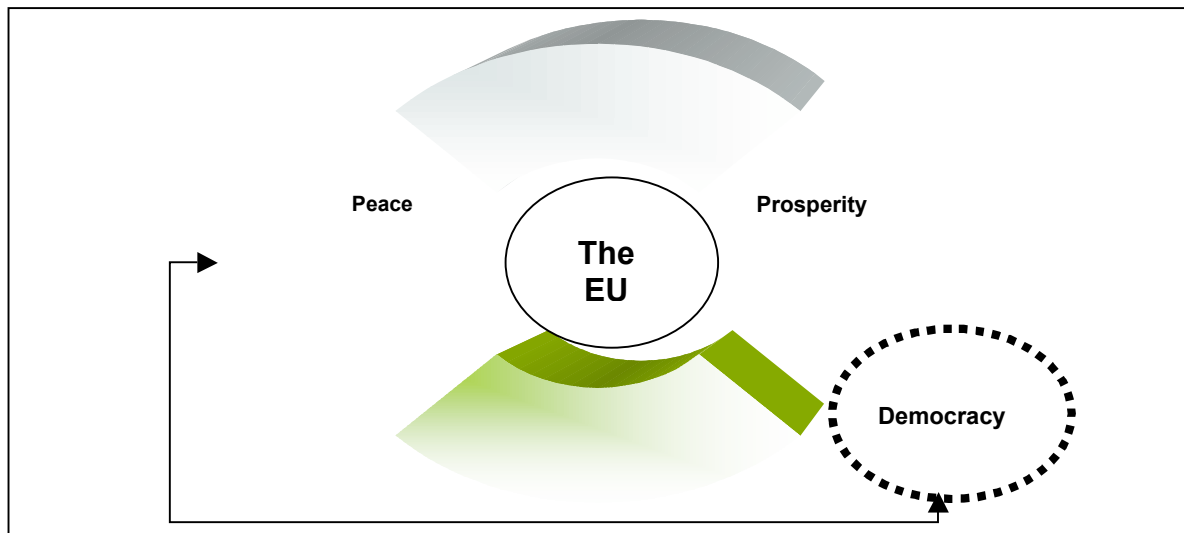
**Figure 1:** Key components of the theoretical concept regarding the EU public sphere, Source: Michailidou, 2007: 64.



**Figure 2:** 'The circle of prosperity', the three key ideas underlining the EU's Information and Communication strategy, Source: Michailidou 2007: 113.



**Figure 3:** Type of interactive communication found on the links available on EUROPA, EU@UN and EURUNION homepages. Source: Michailidou 2007: 154, Data Sources: EUROPA, EU@UN, EURUNION.



**Figure 4:** Online implementation of ‘The circle of prosperity’, the three key ideas underlining the EU’s Information and Communication strategy, adapted from Figure 2, Source: Michailidou 2007: 156.

**Table 1:** Most frequently covered categories of permanently available information linked to the homepage of EUROPA, EURUNION and EU@UN, Source: Michailidou 2007.

<b>Most frequently covered categories of permanently available information linked to the homepage of EUROPA, EURUNION and EU@UN</b>						
<b>Categories</b>	<b>EUROPA</b>		<b>EURUNION</b>		<b>EU@UN</b>	
	2004 (Total links examined: 442)	2005 (Total links examined: 372)	2004 (Total links examined: 979)	2005 (Total links examined: 1011)	2004 (Total links examined: 609)	2005 (Total links examined: 658)
<b>Political issues</b>	EU internal affairs 296 links	EU internal affairs 207 links	EU external politics 635 links	EU external politics 400 links	EU external politics 434 links	EU external politics 388 links
<b>Financial issues</b>	EU internal trade/ development 180 links	EU internal trade/ development 122 links	EU external trade/ development 196 links	EU external trade/ development 217 links	EU external financial aid 174 links	EU external financial aid 169 links
<b>Social issues</b>	Work-related issues 200 links	Work-related issues 147 links	Health policies/ issues 173 links	Health policies/ issues 89 links	Health policies/ issues 58 links	Volunteering/ Solidarity issues 49 links