Citizen, internet and adolescent democracy: Latvian example of eParticipation

Experience of politika.lv, Latvian public policy website

by Rita Ruduša, editor-in-chief of politika.lv
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Being digital, being democratic

Latvian population:

- Majority are ‘digital immigrants’
- Majority are ‘immigrants to democracy’

Challenge: turning a double immigrant into a confident internet user and engaged citizen
Is Internet an answer?

Encouraging examples:

▷ Wired Americans hear more points of view about candidates and key issues than other citizens. They are not using the internet to screen out ideas with which they disagree. *Pew Internet, 2004*

▷ Online political audience is growing (4% in 1996, 25% in 2006), and so is the median age (from 33 to 39) *Pew Internet, 2006*
politika.lv, a meeting place for political audience

- **established** in 2001, since 2003 part of PROVIDUS

- **constructive partner** to policy makers, facilitator of public discussion, useful resource for students and researchers

- **users**: decision makers, NGOs, academia, media, general public

- **2007**: all-time high, 79 000 page views, 49 000 unique users during the ‘umbrella revolution’
"Es zinu, cik grāzi daudziem ir uzņemties atbildētu, kas nāk ar brīvības apziņu, jo tad vairs nav neviena, ko vairākt."
## Contents I

### Topics
- quality of politics
- environment and sustainability
- corruption
- human rights
- social integration
- civil society
- education and employment
- European issues
- media
- other: elections, referenda

### Content items
- articles (+podcasts)
- interviews, round table discussions
- reviews, policy briefs
- research papers
- speeches/presentations
- relevant newspaper articles, links to internet publications/sites
- reader’s letters
Contents II

- weekly opinion polls
- interactive questionnaires
- readers’ comments
- blogs
- on-line consultations
- newsletter
- search engine
- pictures
Christopher Ejugbo`s blog

Apparently Racist Ads
14:53@31.03.2008 | Christopher Ejugbo | [4]
I wish to use this medium to express my reservations and shock over the recent upsurge in the number of racist or apparently racist advertisement. We live in a world and in a society where stereotyping, prejudice, and intolerance...

European union-African Union summit
21:18@26.12.2007 | Christopher Ejugbo | [3]
Not long ago, the leaders of the European Union(EU) and the African Union (AU) met in Lisbon to discuss issues of common interest.I suppose that this summit achieved its most important objective, which is a photo opportunity...

The importance of good communication
21:26@11.11.2007 | Christopher Ejugbo | [7]
My understanding of communication is a process whereby individuals exchange some sort of information. It is very important to pay attention to each letter of this definition. the word "Individuals" implies that there are, at least, two sides...

The integration process and the year of equal opportunities (cont.)
16:36@02.11.2007 | Christopher Ejugbo | [2]
I wonder how many of our there know that the year 2007 is being marked as the year of equal opportunities by the European Union. I suppose that fewer can guess what it stands for. As someone closely connected with the integration process, and just...
eConsultations: examples

- **discussion subject**: draft National Development Plan
  - **partner**: Ministry for Regional Development and Municipal Affairs
  - **objective**: to improve the Plan, including opinions of experts and the public
  - **March-April 2006**

- **discussion subject**: draft guidelines on academic integrity
  - **partner**: Center for Academic Integrity (NGO established by students of SSE)
  - **objective**: facilitate debate within academic community
  - **June-July 2007**
Discussing the documents

- on-line discussion supervised and moderated by a discussion leader

- **main tasks**: create main topics and amend them, manage the discussion forums, “feed” the discussion with new questions and “food for thought”, compile the results
Results: NDP

- 91 invited experts, 1000+ education institutions (in addition to the regular users)
- 3 key background documents and 8 analytical articles/interviews published
- 52 suggestions submitted
- about 1000 unique users visited the designated discussion space
- **follow-up** on suggestions included in the final draft
Online polls: sampling the mood of people

Which symbol characterizes year 2007 best?

- An umbrella (27%)
- A rabbit (12%)
- The rude gesture by MP Lagzdins (48%)
- Giraffes Piks and Periskops (14%)

The best way to achieve academic integrity is:

- To discourage plagiarism at school (28%)
- Establish ethics committees at universities (3%)
- Higher standards for students (54%)
- Check submitted work more thoroughly (15%)
Lessons learned:

Advantages:
- initiative
- interactivity
- transparency
- border-free
- busy people-friendly

Stumbling stones:
- political apathy
- anonymity
- low Internet penetration
- no political support for participation
- lack of understanding of the role of the Internet
If the mass of voters is content with *being ruled*, without questioning the rule, *de jure* ‘democracy’ is the best deal they are ever going to get.

*Vyacheslav Dombrovsky*
Any hope for immigrants?

Yes, because of:

- Internet penetration
- ‘Umbrella’ factor
- Skype
- Pressure from digital natives
Thank you!

Rita Ruduša
www.politika.lv
Skype rcas70