

Social Media Communication in the European Administration. Case study: European Commission

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Abstract. Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) have revolutionized the communication strategies of public institutions in recent years, and communication strategies have understood the different principles on which these new media have been built, compared to traditional means of communication. The decisive role of Social Media on citizens proved especially by increasing the proximity and accessibility of online public and political life not only contributed to the extension of political information, especially on the participation and engagement of citizens in political life. Beyond the huge openness of these social environments, encouraging users to participate in content generation and public reactions, Social Media generates new social structures and, most importantly, empowers the “people” to manifest themselves and to imposes a public agenda, to the detriment of the agendas imposed by the institutional, political and media spectrum. Thus, Social Media has opened a new innovative mechanism through which institution becomes a person, and institutional communication becomes interpersonal communication. This important aspect has forced both advertisers, large corporations, and even public institutions and political parties to reconfigure social media communication strategies and to place great emphasis on personal relationships with the public and less, or not at all, on communicating under institutionalized form. This study focused on analyzing the Social Media communication strategy of the European Commission, from 1 January 2019 to 1 July 2019. Thus, we have analyzed the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that facilitate Social Media communication, we have identified and analyzed the messages that generate high engagement from users as well as the dominant reactions generated by the online audience.

Keywords: European Administration; European Commission; Social Media Communication; Web 2.0; online reactions

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1. Introduction

Social Media is perceived by public administrations as very effective tools that increase citizens' engagement, but sometimes these tools are misused, meaning that public administrations use them only one-way and do not centralize and analyze online audience responses. In order to understand both the role and the importance of Social Media in the communication strategies of national or cross-border public administrations, we need to analyze both the proposed definitions for these new channels of communication, especially the characteristics of Social Media that differ from the characteristics of communication through traditional means of communication.

So, the Federal Web Managers Council defines social media as such: "Social media and Web 2.0 are umbrella terms that encompass the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and content creation. Social media use many technologies and forms, such as blogs, wikis, photo and video sharing, podcasts, social networking, mashups, and virtual worlds". (U.S. General Services Administration [GSA], 2009, p. 1).

Moreover, Staci Zavattaro (2013), unpacked this definition, arguing that social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Reddit, Vimeo etc.) "are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders", while Web 2.0 tools represent digital-manifestation of social capabilities.

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Social Media has differentiated itself from other media through the possibility of personalizing institutional communication, technology that allows a large number of ordinary people to be connected and recognized by a large number of people. Also, there is an unprecedented correlation in any existing institutional communication systems between social network mobilization process and personalization of communication. Thus, the more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized become the manifestations of the users, usually involving communication technologies that allow people to activate their fragile connections in the social networks. In the context in which politicians understand the user's psychology in social networks and behave accordingly, active presence in a social

network can help in influencing the public, as a social network can be a very good channel for the propagation of messages, and through it it can interact more effectively with opinion leaders of online communities. However, these benefits only come if the members of the administration are personally involved in the network, without artificial messages written by a third party who can not feel the needs of the public as a politician does

2. Characteristics of Social Media Communication

In the context in which we can not speak of Social Media as a whole, but are made up of several types of communication networks or channels, with apparently different uses, it is quite complicated to find a common denominator among them.

However, Rich Maggiani (2010) has identified a set of common features that can be found in all types of Social Media. Maggiani has called these key concepts around which the Social Media communication system has been built, the 5C, as follows: “Conversation”, “Contribution”, “Collaboration”, “Connection” and “Community”. In addition to these basic concepts, Horea Mihai Bădău (2011) added other concepts such as “User Generated Content”, “Collection”, “Transparency”, “Independence”, “Perseverance”, “Opening” social structures”, “We give the power of the people” and “The institution becomes a person”.

From the point of view of conversations, Social Media no longer works on the principles of traditional channels, where communication was unidirectional and the public was passive. Social media have developed a new conversation model, characterized by bi or multi-directionality. Moreover, through this process, the role of conventional advertising has declined and that type of unconventional advertisement called “word of mouth” has developed. As Horia Mihai Bădău (2011) notes, in Social Media, “the information circulates from one friend to another, and the degree of trust varies according to the sender. Under these circumstances, the PR is repositioned. Communication specialists no longer have control over the information circulating about the brand”.

Thus, the main strategy in Social Media is no longer to have control over information as it happens in traditional media, but to focus on dialogue with the public, citizens, electorate, customers etc., identifying common needs and interests, and directing individual or mass conversation in depending on the interests of the broadcaster. Through this feature, Social Media develops the social presence of

users and, implicitly, gives them greater influence in the political-journalist-citizens.

Contribution is another aspect that revolutionizes mass communication in social media, and sharing information, opinions and content is the foundation for the development of this new way of mass communication. In fact, “encouragement” is the word of order because the leaders of traditional political communication – journalists, institutions and political actors - no longer have the same power and influence in social media as they have in traditional media. Also, the contribution of ordinary users (becoming overnight opinion leaders) is the main tool through which information can reach the general public. From the perspective of journalists, the audience becomes a “reporter”, who is sharing photos, videos and other public interest information in real-time, from places that are not tapped by a true reporter, which means that the civic journalism has developed fast. From the perspective of public institutions, social media debates are not initiated by politicians or public administrations, but ordinary users have now the power to decide on certain issues and also they can include on the public agenda the themes they want, which do not belong to most on the institutional or media agenda.

Not only contribution is an important feature of social media, but also collaboration. This new channel of communication promotes exchanges of information and content between political, journalist and public institution. By this mechanism, a message can immediately become “viral” by its distribution to the audience interested in a particular type of information. Thus, those users will become opinion leaders in online and share the message in all the nodes of their social network, greatly facilitating the work of the original broadcaster, ie the public institution or political actor. This feature has led users to associate with groups and virtual communities formed by common interests or according to a particular topic of debate.

Another similar feature is closely related to the concept of “connection.” If accessing information on the Internet is done with one click, Social Media abounds in such connections, between its own website and various websites. Users can even customize these connections according to their interests and concerns. Site administrators can direct the entire public on Facebook to their site and so they can increase the degree of interaction between them and social groups.

Beyond the huge openness of these social environments, encouraging users to participate in content generation and public reactions, Social Media generates new

social structures and, most importantly, empowers the “people” to manifest themselves and to impose a public agenda, to the detriment of the agendas imposed by the institutional, political and media spectrum. Thus, Social Media has opened a new innovative mechanism through which institution becomes a person, and institutional communication becomes interpersonal communication. This important aspect has forced both advertisers, large corporations, and even public institutions and political parties to reconfigure social media communication strategies and to place great emphasis on personal relationships with the public and less, or not at all, on communicating under institutionalized form.

This feature has greatly relieved the work of communication specialists, as it is much simpler and more efficient to manage a unitary image - of an institution converted to “person” – than to manage the different images of important members (ministers, commissioners, parliamentarians, directors, spokesmen, etc.) who forms the overall picture of the institution. The image of the public institution that has become a “person” can be recreated from the ground, whether the employees of the institution have a negative image or not, and it is much easier to manage the image crises an institution could ever take part in.

On the other hand, another feature of Social Media is the ability to create and manage virtual communities. Because of this, the audience is segmented more efficiently, creating associations and friendly relations between users who share attitudes, interests and even common goals (eg sports, economy, culture and art, politics, etc.).

3. Social Media Communication of the European Commission

3.1. Research Objectives

O1: Analyze the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that Facilitate Social Media Communication from the European Commission;

O2: Identify and analyze messages that generate high engagement from users;

O3: Analyzing the dominant reactions generated by the online audience on the European Commission's Facebook pages;

O4: Analyze the timeframe where the audience is most active on Facebook.

3.2. Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, we will use both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, we will analyze the key performance indicators (KPIs) that facilitate the European Commission's online communication, namely: the number of fans, the average weekly increase in the number of fans, the number of daily posts, the engagement rate, the dominant reactions, etc. The monitoring period is 01.01.2019 - 01.07.2018.

3.3. Centralization and Data Analysis

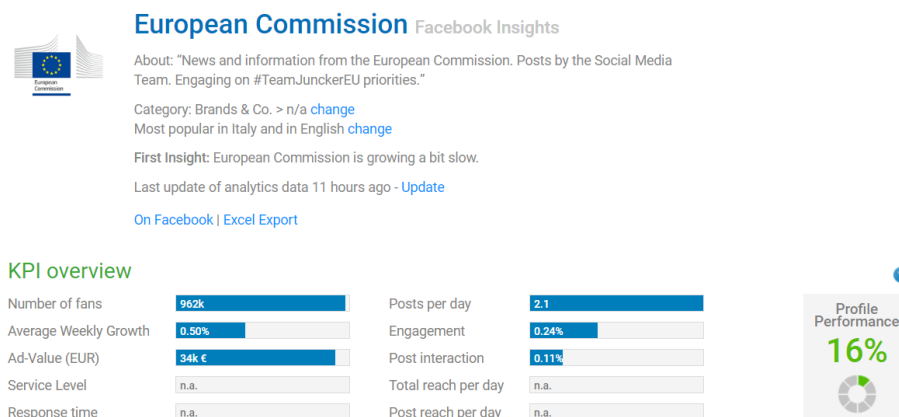


Figure 1. Key Indicators of the European Commission’s Facebook Page

The European Commission's Facebook page totals 962,000 fans, with a weekly average increase of 0.50%. At the same time, the European Commission's Social Media communication specialists post on average 2.1 times a day and the rate of engagement is 0.24%. On 1 January 2019, the European Commission numbered 880,000 fans, and in April 2019 it grew faster than in the past months when it surpassed the threshold of 920,000 fans, this increase continuing until July 1, 2019, when the number of fans reached 920,000.

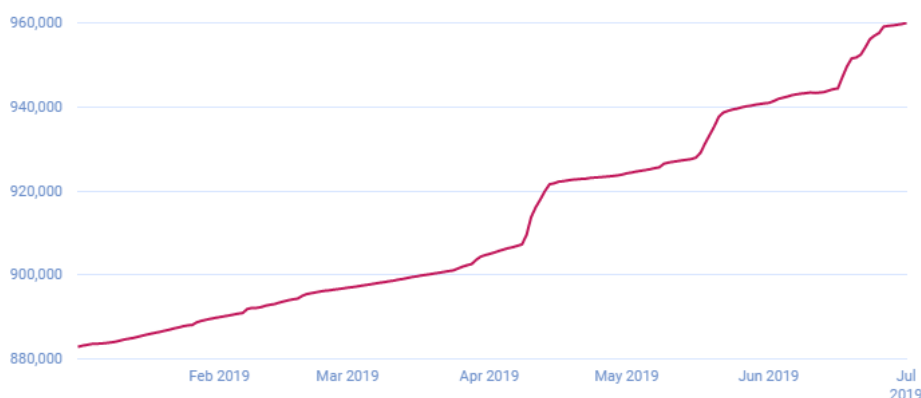


Figure 2. Evolution of the Number of Fans of the Facebook Page of the European Commission (1 January 2019 - 1 July 2019)

During the monitored period, January 1, 2019 - July 1, 2019, 413 posts were published and photos were the most frequent (51.3%), followed by video posts (41.2%), links (5.8%), and statuses (1.7%).

Of the total of 413 posts, we can see that on average fans have been interacting with them by the following methods: likes (average 615 likes per post), comments (an average of 53 comments per post), shares (200 Shares per posting on average), love (on average, 76 loves per post), Haha (7 Haha per post on average), Wow (average 7 Haha per post), Wow (average 7 Wow per posting), Sorry (on average, 16 Sorry per post) and Anger (on average, 3 anger per post).

Type of post	Total posts	Avg. Likes	Avg. Comments	Avg. Shares	Avg. Love	Avg. Haha	Avg. Wow	Avg. Sorry	Avg. Anger
Status	7	325	127	303	41	2	2	2	1
Pictures	212	784	55	228	96	8	10	28	3
Links	24	643	53	134	70	8	4	2	4
Videos	170	411	47	169	53	6	4	3	2
TOTAL	413	615	53	200	76	7	7	16	3

The most commonly used keywords that have generated a very good rate of interaction are: European, Agreement, President, Celebration, Council, Vote, Commission, Union. On the other hand, keywords that generated a lower rate of interaction were: EUandME, Rule, citizens, future, years, Europe, EUprotects,

protection, women, support, people, online, sharing, travel, working, project and so on. The indicator of the dominant reaction shows that the “love” reaction is the most common, followed by “sad”, “like”, “anger” and “haha”.

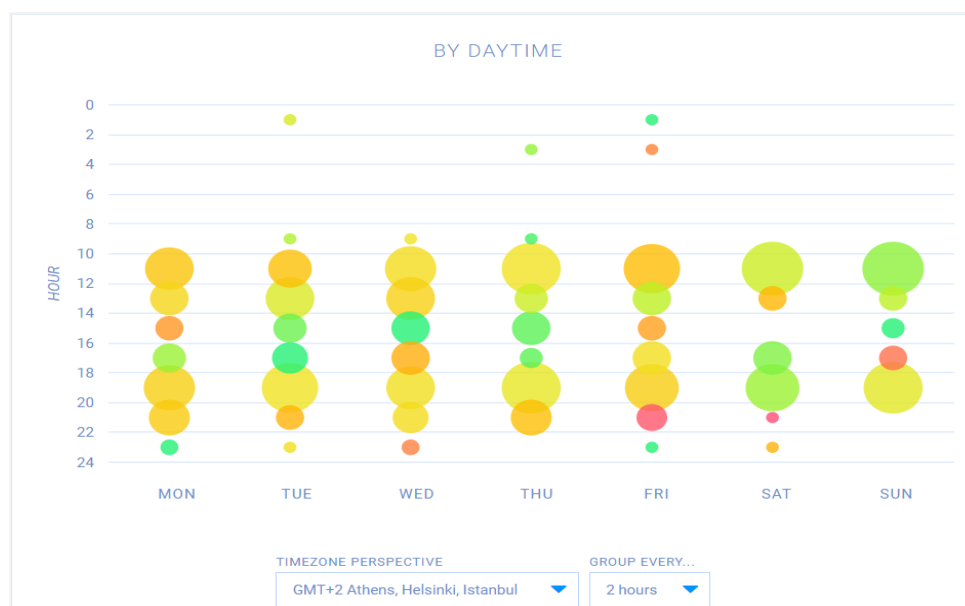


Figure 3. Weekdays and Schedule of European Commission Posts on Their Official Facebook page

According to the chart above, the European Commission does not often post in the hourly intervals in which the public is online and very active. Recommended weekdays and times are: Monday (22.00-24.00), Tuesdays (14.00-18.00), Wednesday (14.00-16.00), Thursdays (14.00-18.00), Fridays (22.00-24.00), Saturdays (16.00-18.00) and Sunday (10.00-16.00).

Posts with the best engagement rate:

a. On April 10, 2019, at 4:07 PM, the European Commission published a photo with a black hole on the Facebook page, with the following text: “This is the first ever image of a black hole. That the EU-funded researchers who have played a key role in this Event Horizon Telescope international collaboration, we will keep supporting science and pushing the boundaries of the unimaginable. #RealBlackHole Black Hole © Event Horizon Telescope, 2019”. This post generated 8,128 likes, 1379 “love”, 694 wow, 325 comments and 3068 shares. Not only has the discovery generated an enthusiastic reaction from users, as well as the

involvement of the European Commission in international science projects, placing the European Union as a high-caliber player in new astrophysics discoveries.

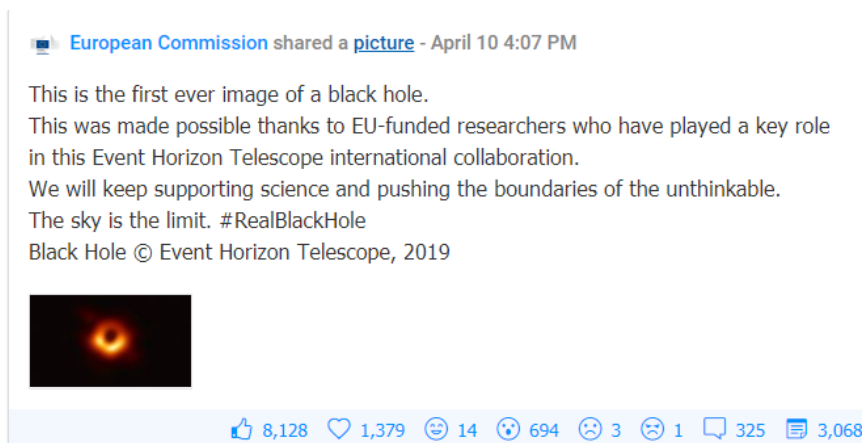


Figure 4. Posting the Highest Engagement Rate (January 1 to July 1, 2019)

b. On May 16, 2019, at 11.24 PM, the European Commission sends a message stating against discrimination and “In the EU you have the right to love who you want to love”. This message follows the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, through which the European Union celebrates diversity and show pro LGBT community. The post generated 7086 likes, 1783 love reactions, 105 haha reactions, 21 wow reactions, 13 sad reactions, 46 angry reactions, 230 comments and 2161 shares. The reactions to the position of the European Commission were strongly positive, the number of negative reactions being insignificant, demonstrating that the messages and policy of the European Commission are in line with the beliefs of users in the European Space;

c. Postarea din 16 mai 2019, ora 5.40 PM subliniaza ca 1 in 8 women develops breast cancer at some point in her life. Totodata, Comisia Europeana crede ca “every woman must receive the same high-quality treatment no matter where she is in Europe. With support, specialist from 35 countries are connected and working towards a high-quality treatment for breast cancer across Europe”. Aceasta postare a generat 6921 de like-uri, 267 de reactii de tip love, 4 haha, 23 wow, 284 sad, 10 angry, 64 de comentarii si 946 de shares;

d. The post on 23 March 2019, 10.45 AM, states that “in the EU, you can be a neighbor to anyone!” This is thanks to the freedom of movement, one of the fundamental principles of the EU. Search for a job in any EU country. There is no

work permit. ThisIsTheEU”. This post generated 5716 likes, 893 love reactions, 60 haha, 8 wow, 8 sad, 8 angry, 243 comments and 1345 shares;

e. By posting on May 9, 9.30 AM, the European Commission celebrates Europe Day with the slogan “United in diversity”. At the same time, the European Commission is sending the following message to the fans of the page: “Wherever you come from in the EU, let's keep working together for peace and prosperity, our distinct cultures, traditions and languages make us stronger. EU country flag in a comment! “. The post generated 3749 likes, 708 love, 9 haha, 9 wow, 1 sad, 2 angry, 810 comments and 2941 shares;

f. By posting on March 29, 2019, 5.35 PM, the European Commission regrets the negative vote in the House of Commons, through which the UK is going to emerge from the European Union. “The EU has been preparing for this since December 2017 and is now fully prepared for a” no-deal “scenario at midnight on 12 April. no circumstances will be replicated in a “no-deal” scenario. Sectoral mini-deals are not an option”. The post generated 4005 likes, 167 love, 60 haha, 325 wow, 1083 sad, 60 angry, 441 comments and 1892 shares. Most users who reacted to this post have shown disapproval of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union;

g. On February 11, 2019, the European Commission celebrates the International Day of Women and Girls in Science through a post published at 11.50 am. The European Commission talks about Marie Skłodowska-Curie, who was a Polish-born physicist, chemist and discoverer, praising her performance in science and the fact that she was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize and the first person to win this prestigious prize twice, for two different areas. The European Commission also recalls that, since 1996, they have been honored to offer grants in her name, having benefited over 100,000 researchers so far. The post generated 4906 likes, 647 love, 13 haha, 20 wow, 4 sad, 103 comments and 1730 shares;

h. The posting on January 27, 2019, at 10.10 am, commemorates The Holocaust Remembrance Day through a statement by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker: “Ignorance is dangerous. As time goes on and memories fade, it is our moral duty, more than ever, to remember. We cannot change history but we can make sure that future generations do not witness this intolerable horror again”. The post generated 3237 likes, 182 love, 1 haha, 2 wow, 652 sad, 9 angry, 110 comments and 3187 shares;

i. In the post on 14 June 2019 at 12.50 pm, the European Commission recalls the appearance of the Schengen Area in 1985. “In 1985, five countries decided to put

an end to internal border controls and since then, the Schengen area has been growing. Today, frontiers between 26 countries only exist on the maps and people can travel freely there. The Schengen area is home to more than 400 million citizens and it guarantees free movement to anyone legally present in the EU territory”. The post generated 4417 likes, 912 love, 58 haha, 11 wow, 3 sad, 9 angry, 179 comments and 1154 shares;

j. By posting on 2 June 2019, at 6.45 PM, the European Commission stated that Germany, Lithuania and Slovenia are among the top eight recyclers of plastics in the EU, citing the statistical data provided by Eurostat. The post generated 3819 like, 621 love, 11 haha, 85 wow, 2 sets, 172 comments and 1816 shares.

4. Conclusions

The European Commission's communication specialists have used key messages in the monitored period that generate, in most cases, “love”, “wow” and “like” reactions. In other words, they focused on messages that do not polarize public opinion, generating scandals among users, but positive and mobilizing messages that return back to the European Commission's institution in the form of increased trust capital. This can be seen from the large number of positive comments on the institution's activity and the small number of negative messages (it uses the strategy according to which you can not comment negatively on a positive message).

On the principle of “United in diversity”, the European Commission's Facebook page has used topics such as: (1) involving the European Union in the main scientific discoveries of the current year (the first black hole ever photographed), (2) messages of love and tolerance for the LGBT community, (3) European Union involvement in combating breast cancer, (4) freedom of movement, as a fundamental principle around which the European Union was created, (5) disappointment that United Kingdom is about to leave the European Union, (6) celebrating the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, in particular the celebration of Marie Skłodowska-Curie - a Polish-born physicist, chemist and discoverer, and how over 100,000 researchers benefited from Union grants with her name on them, (7) the commemoration of the Holocaust Day, (8) the remorse of the birth of the Schengen Area, (9) the recycling policy of the plastic in European Union.

However, the European Commission does not use all the resources that its Facebook page can provide. For example, only 0.11% of the 962,000 fans interact with posts, and 0.24% is the engagement rate. For the most part, this does not happen because of the topics chosen in the posts, but mainly because of the hours and days when messages are posted. We have been able to observe in most cases that European Commission communicators have not posted on the days and hours when their audience is online and active, such as Monday (22.00-24.00), Tuesdays (14.00-18.00), Wednesday (14.00-16.00) Thursdays (14.00-18.00), Fridays (22.00-24.00), Saturdays (16.00-18.00) and Sunday (10.00-16.00).

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