

EU ONLINE DEBATES MARRED BY “LACK OF ENGAGEMENT BY POLICY-MAKERS”

Think tank report calls on EU to present public information in a more digestible form

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The EU's efforts to consult the public via the Internet has been marred by a “lack of engagement by policy-makers” and leaves people feeling they are “shooting their policies into a vacuum” according to a new report from the Foreign Policy Centre. In *Rebooting Europe: Digital Deliberation and European Democracy*, Mats Engstrom argues that Europe's politicians haven't bothered to participate in online debates, and information posted on the web is far too technical to be accessible to most voters. Far from enhancing democracy, web discussions have become the preserve of special interests and those with an interest in political science, he claims.

In a wide-ranging report, Engstrom also calls for Europe's internet and digital TV services to be protected from market pressures to guard against sensationalist political coverage. He proposes that this could be achieved through changes in Competition Policy law to allow public subsidies, and through the EU championing an agreement on Internet governance.

Mats Engstrom was Special Advisor to Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and a Deputy State Secretary at the Ministry for Environment in Stockholm.

Analysis:

- **Internet Democracy is stifled by the discrepancies between internet use in member states:** Only 10% of Greek households have access to the internet compared to 65% in the Netherlands.
- **Schools have also had limited opportunity to use online educational resources about the EU.** Though 93% of Europe's schools have Internet access, an average 40 pupils share a PC in Greece compared to just 4 in Denmark.
- **Discussions tend to be dominated by an exclusive coterie of policy-experts.** Web exchanges assume an in-depth knowledge of EU treaties and often make arcane references to political science textbooks. Economic interests have also tended to dominate debates in areas such as telecommunications or the waste disposal of electric equipment.

Recommendations:

- **EU material prepared for the Internet must be more comprehensible and electronic consultations should be introduced for all Commission proposals.** In addition to full-text documents, an overview of national debates could be produced prior to Council sessions. The current e-content and Media plus programmes should be expanded and better co-ordinated to include more money for digital content and open networks.

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- **Internet voting should be trailed in one region per country** during the next elections to the European Parliament
- **The Amsterdam Treaty should be amended to allow some state aids to be paid in the interests of “public service” broadcasting.** This would mean radical changes to competition policy decisions.
- **Broadband services should also be covered by the obligation on member states to ensure that all citizens have access to basic telecom services.**
- **The EU should push for an international agreement on Internet governance and make Internet access for all a priority in WTO negotiations on the audio-visual sector.** One important aim should be to preserve the open-for-all principle of the Internet, and to develop a charter of citizen’s rights on the net, including the possibility to participate in policy-making.

Report author Mats Engstrom said:

“We can choose between a Europe where citizens can participate in decisions online, or we can divide them into private networks - where entertainment and intrigue are the main elements of politics”.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The Foreign Policy Centre thinktank was established in 1998 by Tony Blair MP (Patron) and Robin Cook MP (President) to explore the implications of globalisation.
2. Mats Engstrom was previously Special Adviser to the Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Lindh and a Deputy State Secretary at the Ministry for Environment in Stockholm. He is editor of the Swedish newsletter Europapolitik.nu and writes on European affairs for the largest Scandinavian daily newspaper, *Aftonbladet*.
3. *Rebooting Europe: Digital Deliberation and European Democracy* is published by The Foreign Policy Centre and the British Council in association with Weber Shandwick Public Affairs.

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