The Blogs of the European Commission: Public-private Space in a Professional Institutional Context

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Abstract

The paper will examine and compare the blogs posted by EU Commissioners which, as the official EU website says, will give 'a personal, insider's view on EU affairs'. They would appear to be a way of bringing the EU institutions closer to EU citizens. However, blogs contain a kind of inherent contradiction in them because of their very public, but private nature. In the case of EU commissioners this will probably lead to tension between the purpose of a blog – a more intimate and personal expression of ideas, attitudes and beliefs – and the institutional role of the Commissioner. The Commissioners come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which may lead to different approaches to this new genre and how each one exploits it to establish his/her own professional and institutional identity. A very eclectic methodological approach has been adopted in order to capture the many aspects of the use of blogs in an institutional context, drawing on Herring *et al.*'s classification for assessing the characteristics of blogs, Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Theory.

Keywords: Blogs, EU commissioners, personal identity, institutional identity.

1. Introduction

It has been estimated that there are now over 156 million public blogs in existence. Although they are a new genre made possible by advanced technology, they have their origins in the diaries or logbooks which keep a chronological record of journeys on board ship (Miller and Shepherd 2004). According to the <blo.gs> website, "a weblog (or blog) is a type of web site (or page) that is organised much like a diary or journal – short nuggets of writing added regularly (or not) as a running commentary on almost any subject. Other than this time-oriented structure, one weblog may not have all that much in common with the next" (quoted in Herring *et al.* 2004: 3 n.4). Blogs

have been classified according to the content of their entries; they may be filters which direct readers to selected content elsewhere on the web, personal journals which give voice to the bloggers' own thoughts and ideas or k-logs (notebooks) with longer, focused essays (Blood 2002; Herring *et al.* 2005). Others still can have 'mixed' purposes covering all of the above mentioned functions. What they do have in common, however, is that people share 'unprecedented amounts of personal information with total strangers, potentially millions of them' (Miller and Shepherd 2004: 4).

The paper will examine and compare a very particular type of blog, those posted by EU Commissioners. Blogs contain a kind of inherent contradiction because of their very public, but private nature. So why should EU Commissioners want to keep a blog? The official EU website says, the blogs will give 'a personal, insider's view on EU affairs'. In an age in which there is an abundance of information immediately available from a variety of sources, clearly the 'insider's view' is not primarily concerned with information as such, but rather communication in the sense of direct contact with the public at large. In fact, it has long been acknowledged that the EU needs to communicate more directly with the general public to narrow the gap between institution and citizens (Wodak and Wright 2006: 252). But it is important to remember that the Commissioners' blogs are internal to the official EU website and therefore subject to the constraints of the institution. This may lead to tension between the purpose of a blog – a more intimate and personal expression of ideas, attitudes and beliefs – and the institutional role of the Commissioner.

Research about politics on the Internet has focused mainly on its use by politicians in election campaigns or on the potential of the net to revitalise citizen participation in political discourse by creating virtual public sphere(s), thus giving voice to numerous groups and individuals (Wodak and Wright 2006; Wodak and Koller 2008).

This paper aims to investigate the use of blogs by politicians in day-to-day communication with citizens on the web (Myers 2010: 3) and particularly how they resolve the tension between their personal and institutional identities. The use of blogs by political institutions is very limited. A quick review of some government websites showed that only the White House has a blog, maintained by a number of

'behind the scenes' staff and not government members themselves. 10 Downing Street, the Élysée and the German Kanzler's websites do not have blogs.

2. Corpus and methodology

The corpus is composed of the blogs of six, non-native speaker Commissioners from the beginning of their term of office in the second Barroso Commission in January 2010 (or in some cases from their first blog posting) until the first week in December 2011 (available at http://europa.eu/take-part/blogs/index_en.htm). The fact that only six out of the total number of 27 members of the Commission have blogs raises some questions about how they are viewed by the Commissioners themselves. However, even with just 6 bloggers, there are noticeable differences in style, though as the analysis will reveal these differences do not prevent some general characteristics from emerging. Clearly with just six bloggers no conclusions can be drawn, so only a few observations about the nature of institutional blogs will be made.

The methodology followed a very eclectic approach in order to capture the many aspects of the use of blogs in an institutional context. The first stage involved a simplified version of the methodology adopted by Herring *et al.* (2004) to assess the general characteristics of the blogs and "give an empirical snapshot" of them (Herring *et al.* 2004: 1). The study then drew on two different approaches to investigate the institutional and personal dimensions of the blogs, firstly through Critical Discourse Analysis and secondly through the Appraisal theory. CDA aims to explore the relationship between discursive practices and texts and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes (Fairclough 1993; Mayr 2008). Although I do not intend to emphasise the power relations between the EU as an institution and its citizens, the motivation behind the blogs, as we have seen, is to introduce the public to the work and lives of the EU Commissioners. In CDA language use is seen as constitutive of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and this type of analysis should give some insights into the approach adopted by the bloggers. The Appraisal framework is an approach that explores, describes and explains the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas

and to manage interpersonal positionings and relationships (White 2001: 1). Appraisal theory helps to reveal the ideological positions of the bloggers and the way this reflects their relationship with the audience (Page 2003: 217). It was applied to the 12 most recent postings of each Commissioner in the corpus.

3. Characteristics of the blogs

Table 1 summarises the macro characteristics of the blogs.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the blogs

	Maria Damanaki	Kristalina Georgieva	Neelie Kroes	Cecilia Malmström	Andris Piebalgs	Maroš Šefčovič
Words – total – unique	14,632 2,801	41,303 5,117	37,982 4,751	29,590 3,551	26,058 3,391	4,677 1,352
Period	17 mths	20 mths	21 mths	9 mths	25 mths	2 mths
No. of postings	31	91	120	129	46	4
Av. Frequency	14-21 days	3-10 days	5 days	4-5 days	10-12 days	15 days - 6 wks
Av. Length	472	448	311	229	564	1,162
Range of length	294-732	100-861	8-1,116	34-598	51-2,405	863-1,294
Features	Photos Links	Photos Links	Photos Links Videos	Photos Links	Photos Links	–
Interactive	Comment Rating	Comment	Comment	Comment	Comment Rating	Comment Rating

The size of the subcorpora, the average length and the frequency of the postings suggest the approach adopted by each blogger. Without wanting to enter into a discussion about gender, it is interesting to note that both male commissioners tend to write longer postings and less frequently than their female counterparts. Following a more

specific classification of the Commissioners' postings than the one suggested by Blood (2000) and Herring *et al.* (2004), the entries can be defined according to their content and communicative purpose as diaries, reports, statements of intent (about future plans), statements of official position and personal comments, though some entries combine two or more of these types. There is not sufficient space to provide examples for all, but here are extracts from a diary-like entry (1 and 2), a statement of intent (3) and a comment (4):

(1) I am currently in Paris for the G6 meeting. […] Paris was beautifully decorated but unfortunately there was not time for Christmas shopping. (Malmström December 1, 2011)
(2) I've enjoyed the last few days off in Gothenburg, where spring was in full bloom. (Malmström April 29, 2011)
(3) For that, the proposal for the new European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, due for tomorrow, will help small-scale fisheries to become more profitable and more viable. We have to turn from building bigger and bigger vessels to the care of our fisheries communities. The new funding will aim to reverse the decline of many coastal areas and island communities which are dependent on fishing. It will add more value to fishing related activities and will promote the diversification of local communities to other sectors of the maritime economy … (Damanaki December 1, 2011)
(4) A newborn baby's first cry has just marked a world record – the seven billionth person living on our planet was born.
Each new life is a new hope. And yet, all too many hopes get crushed by poverty and conflicts. So is reaching the seventh billion a reason to celebrate or to pause and think about our future?
   I, for one, go for the latter. My job as humanitarian commissioner puts me face to face with starving children in countries with record high population growth and fragile ecosystems. There food security is an unachievable dream for millions of people. (Georgieva November 30, 2011)

In line with the filter function of blogs, all the Commissioners have links to documents and other websites providing further information on the issues raised. They also exploit the multi-medial nature of blogs by including photographs and some videos. And perhaps more importantly, in view of the need to bridge the gap between institution and citizen, they all offer the possibility to write comments on the postings. The response of the public varies extensively, depending on the topic, but only occasionally do the Commissioners respond to comments. According to Krishnamurthy

"the posts that are most insightful or controversial get the most comments" (quoted in Herring *et al.* 2004: 3). Three Commissioners also invite ratings, that is, readers are asked to judge and evaluate the blog entry and an average 'mark' out of 5 is awarded.

The first blogs posted by the Commissioners in each subcorpus suggest different attitudes and approaches to blogs among the Commissioners. Two, Piebalgs and Šefčovič, held office in the previous Commission and probably each already had a blog, so they made no specific comments about it. In contrast, Damanaki 'dived' straight into her blog, so to speak, by making an almost poetic declaration about her work in the Commission:

(5) THE SEA, THE SEA
   The Mediterranean
   It is the sea I know best. The meeting place of civilisations, a thrilling physical unit and above all a wonderful human unit. The Mediterranean.
   In my capacity as EU Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, I am now revisiting this beautiful region […]: how to find ways to build a sustainable future for fishermen, their families and their communities. (Damanaki June 16, 2010)

The three remaining Commissioners make explicit references to the start of their blogs:

(6) Ever since I took up office I've been meaning to start an English blog and now I've finally to do so. […] My work as Commissioner is based on transparency and openness and I see this blog as an important tool to communicate and for you to comment on my work. (Malmström February 10, 2011)
(7) Thanks for checking this page. Starting from next week, I will be making regular postings. Following me here will be a quick way to keep up to date with my work as European Commissioner responsible for the Digital Agenda […] (Kroes March 3, 2010)
(8) Let me start with a warm welcome to my blog. I am launching it in order to share thoughts and feelings on my job as Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response. I also hope to tap into your ideas, so that together we can make the best out of this new portfolio. (Georgieva March 1, 2010)

(6) is businesslike and professional, but does emphasise the communicative aspect of blogs and invites interaction and feedback,

whilst (7) suggests a more one-way relationship in which the reader is to be informed. (8) offers the most personal approach, with *a warm welcome*, and states, significantly, the purpose of the blog as *to share thoughts and feelings* and draw on the ideas of readers.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

A CDA approach has been followed to investigate the institutional characteristics of the blogs. Institutional 'talk' is closely connected with and structured by the institutional goals that participants are expected to accomplish and by their obligation to align their identity with the institution (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 90).

An essential aspect for this type of analysis is the use of pronouns to see how the bloggers position themselves with the institution (and their readers). Georgieva is the only blogger to use *I* more frequently than *we*. For all the others we can find a more frequent use of *we*, although there is no significant difference, except for Damanaki who uses *we* twice as much as *I*.

TABLE 2
Use of pronouns

	Damanaki	Georgieva	Kroes	Malmström	Piebalgs	Šefčovič
I	0.78%	1.09%	1.04%	1.11%	1.14%	0.68%
we	1.50%	0.93%	1.05%	1.16%	1.16%	0.75%
you	0.09%	0.18%	0.49%	0.09%	0.32%	0.10%

We personalises the institution, the EU, but also gives the idea of a united, homogeneous and monolithic identity. However, *we* can play a double role as exclusive and inclusive, exclusive in the sense of referring to the EU or the Commission or inclusive as 'we' the EU citizens, people of Europe or the world. Therefore, the exclusive *we* reinforces the institutional identity, but at the same time does not open up to the readers and the 'them and us' syndrome remains in place.

The following example shows an interesting progression in the use of pronouns and highlights their significance in discourse.

(9) Man has been profiting of Nature for a long time and the supremacy given by ever evolving technologies overcame virtually all limits. Our new technologies, combined with our numbers, have made us dangerous.

   We all need to understand that those with the most technology have the greatest moral obligation to use it wisely. We must always bear in mind that what we do to nature, we do to ourselves. […]

   The thorough review of the Common Fisheries Policy we have started to undertake is to change the way we fish. From now on we want to uphold ecological sustainability as the source and economic and social sustainability as the results – and not the other way round.

   I hope that today's celebrations will raise Europeans' awareness further, because we need all their support, as they will play a key role in determining the level of ambition of our reforms […] (Danaki June 8, 2011)

We move from a generalised *Man* towards an inclusive *we*, when referring to those in the developed world and then to an exclusive *we* with reference to the Common Fisheries Policy. Finally, *I* the Commissioner, as part of *we* the Commission, need 'them', European citizens, to play a key role.

   Some Commissioners seem to be more aware of this counter-positioning and use *you* to include the reader, what Fairclough (1993: 140) calls "personalization" of public discourse. In (10) the blogger directly addresses the reader personally with *you* and even apologises for the technicality of the discourse, thus aligning herself with the reader.

(10) In case you missed it, late last week came significant news for Internet governance … You'd be forgiven if you don't know what that means! (Kroes November 14, 2011)

But once again we come up against the double function of a pronoun, as *you* can also act as a general impersonal form, though the blogger still personalises the discourse by aligning herself with the reader through shared knowledge:

(11) When you think of "robots" you might think of some comical 1950's vision of the future – or maybe something from Isaac Asimov, or Star Wars. (Kroes November 28, 2011)

5. Appraisal in the blogs

The analysis consisted in identifying the use of ATTITUDE in the blogs, namely AFFECT (emotions, reacting to behaviour, text/

process, phenomena), JUDGEMENT (ethics; evaluating behaviour) and APPRECIATION (aesthetics; evaluating text/process, natural phenomena) following Martin 2003, Martin and White 2005, White 2001 and Page 2003. It was hoped in this way to assess to what extent the blogs are 'personal' or 'institutional'. In "AFFECT the emotion is directly related to the Appraiser whereas with APPRECIATION, the quality is associated with the object being appraised rather than the person doing the appraising" (Page 2003: 222). As a consequence, a personal approach may be expected to use more expressions of AFFECT, whereas an 'institutional' approach will probably favour more APPRECIATION.

Against all expectations, given the personal nature of blogs, there are more occurrences of APPRECIATION than AFFECT. The following example shows, however, how close the two categories are (Martin 2003: 147), because the blogger prefers to describe the feelings he was experiencing by attributing them to the general situation:

(12) It is my role to represent the Commission in this Council, and in a rather tense atmosphere I had to react to many questions … (Šefčovič November 11, 2011)

Furthermore, the expressions of AFFECT appear very frequently to be formulaic, set phrases used in formal circumstances, as for example "I was delighted to …", "I was happy to …" "I was proud to …". Other times AFFECT is expressed through a modal adjunct, for example *with concern*:

(13) I am following *with concern* the recent developments in Egypt. (Malmström November 23, 2011)

or in impersonal forms:

(14*) It is worrying* that countries do not realize that the climate investments we make today will yield significant gains in the future. (Malmström November 28, 2011)

thus diminishing the emotive impact and the Commissioner's personal involvement. Occasionally there are expressions of AFFECT which appear to be spontaneous because they use non-core vocabulary:

(15) I was *taken aback* when Andreas Hoefler, a member of a helicopter crew with the important task of fighting forest fires, told me that he had been a volunteer for 20 years. He looked too young! (Georgieva December 4, 2011)

(16) I was *shocked* at the number of artists – whether they're writers, painters, photographers, musicians, whatever – whose earnings are under the paltry figure of 1000 euros a month, less than the minimum wage. That's pretty *devastating*, for the artists themselves and for Europe as a whole. (Kroes November 21, 2011)

or are in a less formal register:

(17) And it's great to see European cooperation and coordination in action, including an EU strategic partner. (Georgieva September 16, 2011)

In the case of expressions of JUDGEMENT most occurrences are positive and in the subcategory of Social Esteem, in particular capacity and tenacity:

(16) We have kept to our ambitions and been a leader throughout this process; helping to bring together and build consensus amongst all stakeholders... (Piebalgs December 5 2011)

(17) This is an historical achievement, for which I must thank the EU Polish Presidency: our cooperation was excellent and made possible decisions that will be difficult in the short term, but were taken knowing that it is the maximum we can do for our fishermen, within the red line of scientific advice. (Damanaki October 25 2011)

though there are also a number of cases of propriety (Social Sanction):

(18)… the EU is probably the most consensual institution in the world – always trying to find a compromise solution acceptable for all. (Šefčovič September 29 2011)

(19) ICT is for everyone: we cannot have a digital divide. (Kroes December 2, 2011)

What is particularly striking about the expressions of JUDGEMENT is the fact that it is the EU or the Commission or the Commissioners' work itself that is being appraised, thus projecting a very positive, self-congratulatory image, which appears as a justification for their

presence in the Commission or even for the very existence of the Commission itself. Although Page suggests that Social Esteem carries more social and interpersonal values as opposed to Social Sanction which might carry ethical or moral weight (2003: 226), capacity and tenacity (Social Esteem) would seem in the context of the EU blogs to reflect the professional and institutional identity rather than the private and personal figure of the blogger.

6. Concluding remarks

By following different approaches in the study of the EU Commissioners' blogs this study has been possible to identify those features of the blog which do not only fit in with the traditional characteristics of the genre, but are also peculiar to institutional blogs. The discourse has been shown to be predominantly institutional, with only occasionally a little space being given to personal 'talk', primarily by the female Commissioners. Indeed the analysis made with the Appraisal theory revealed a more extensive use of Appreciation than Affect, whilst Judgement is used to self-evaluate positively the EU, the Commission and its work, thus legitimising the institution in response to criticism, especially about the alienation of European citizens.

There are a number of questions which have not been addressed in this paper because of a shortage of space. Firstly, as the topics raised in the blogs reflect the various areas of responsibility of the Commissioners, to what extent and in what way do they influence the discourse? For example, do the Commissioners involved with more social activities and issues use a less institutional approach than the others? And secondly, as all the bloggers are non-native speakers and promote and uphold their institutional personae, can their English be described as Euroenglish? These could be areas of interest for future study.

This research has only just begun to investigate the day-to-day communication of Commissioners' with the public at large. As many Commissioners (including those that have blogs) also use Twitter, Facebook and other social networks, it would also be interesting to make a comparative study of their use of these different services, each with its own specific characteristics and functions and, very importantly, outside the confines and constraints of the EU website,

which may lead to a tipping of the balance between institutional and personal in favour of the latter.

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