

# AGENDA SETTER

 Communication ideas in the eyes of experts

## TH!NKING OF VOTING?

*Another European election, another record low turnout. But at least the TH!NK ABOUT IT campaign got more young people debating the issues.*

by Richard Morgan

**W**e all care about how our countries are run, and many of us take the choice to voice our opinions in local and national government elections. Voting is a privilege and a right that all adult European citizens can exercise. But in this day and age, when as much as 80 per cent of all legislation to affect EU member states originates in Brussels, it is disconcerting to find that the number of people who take an interest in EU matters seems to be declining significantly. Since the inaugural European elections of 1979, when 61.99 per cent of people came out to vote, each consequent contest has suffered from decreasing turnout levels. Only 45.47 per cent voted in 2004.

All this meant that the European institutions had a rather large job on their hands to encourage voters to turn up for the June 2009 elections. One campaign that helped promote European debate among citizens was TH!NK ABOUT IT, a blogging website launched by the European Journalism Centre (EJC), with a little financial stimulus provided by the European Commission. TH!NK's aim was to get more people to vote from the (typically under-represented) 16-25 age group.

But the EJC's Managing Editor, Anne Autio, reveals that TH!NK was not created with any sort of political agenda. "It started out as an experiment," she says. "Basically, we wanted to do something with bloggers in relation to the European Elections, and we wanted to create an arena for young people to talk freely about themselves and the elections."

**A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY** TH!NK was launched in February, claiming to be "a dynamic community of bloggers, journalists and journalism students, a forum alive with debate and discussion, a creative portal to inspire youth involvement with the 2009 Parliamentary Elections." The

site's tagline is "European blogging competition 2009: 81 bloggers. 27 member states. 4 months of writing. Young media junkies getting political about the union". The competition aspect of the site involved the best blogs, as voted for by members of the TH!NK community, winning prizes like laptops, cameras and iPhones. These social media tools would have been useful for accessing and participating in TH!NK's other multimedia channels, which included pages on YouTube and Facebook.

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However, attracting high quality journalism by offering the possibility of winning desirable electrical items was not what the campaign was all about. TH!NK made its biggest impression by getting millions of Europe's young people talking before the elections took place. By using bloggers from all 27 EU member states, the EJC ensured that the debate would be as wide-ranging and as open as possible. "In the beginning, the hard part was to find the right people," says Autio, "because



Screenshots: thinkaboutit.eu

in blogging, very often what happens is that people talk about their back yard to the people in their area, and with this project, we tried to get people from all over the EU member states to talk to each other. That was a challenge!”

And talk to each other they did. TH!NK had thousands of posts, and millions of readers, with the site receiving 2.7 million hits between February and June. This is a quarter of a million more than EUtube, the EU’s official online television channel, has received since its launch more than three years ago. Topics

discussed included all aspects of life as an EU citizen, the impending elections, and more. The EJC took the decision not to censor any of the discussions, instead letting bloggers clash whenever opinions differed. Anne Autio believes that this freedom to speak helped make the debate completely open, leading to more honest and reliable content being produced – even if they did have to step in to cool a few tempers. “At some points, there were discussions that got a bit personal,” she says. “In those cases, we gently intervened and asked the people to stick to the facts to make their arguments instead. But other than that, we just set the stage for the bloggers and let the platform be theirs, and I think that was the key to why they took it to be their own and why they were so active.”

Careful to make sure that TH!NK was not exclusively populated by young, inexperienced bloggers, the EJC also approached some journalists and older media users to take part. “We wanted to have some students and young journalists taking part, but also a mix of experienced bloggers,” says Anne Autio. “For example, there were some highly respected, established bloggers like Jon Worth, who was one of the editors. This mix of people led to fruitful interaction between everybody, and I think it was one of the key things that made sure the discussions really took off.”

**GETTING THE POLITICIANS INVOLVED** Even some European politicians got involved. European Commissioner Margot Wallström (who is Vice President of the Commission and in charge of Institutional Relations and Communication) posted a single blog entry, leading to frenzied responses from other users. Many thought the post was a PR stunt by one of the Commissioner’s team until Wallström followed up on it a week later. The EJC also managed to get the press secretary from UKIP, the Eurosceptic UK Independence Party, to join in the fun.

But many political parties steered clear of the site. Anne Autio believes that this is due to a fear of social media as a communications tool by certain MEPs and political groups. “A big problem with the MEPs themselves is that they are worried that if they open this channel, there will be no end to it – they can’t close it,” she says. “If they engage in a discussion on a site like TH!NK, they think they can’t just say they’ve had enough and stop. So instead they prefer to keep the door completely closed, and I think that’s a shame.” And while Autio believes that many politicians could learn from the success of Barack Obama’s social media-championing presidential campaign of 2008, she thinks that many “seem to be very apprehensive about it. And that’s a great shame, because they lose voters, the



EXPERT OPINION

➔ **Get the politicians listening**

Back in 2005, each French voter received a hard copy of the then EU Constitutional Treaty weeks prior to getting to the ballot. Boring? No! The pre-electoral campaign gave way to passionate citizen debates on the street, in the workplace, on television, in family circles and online. Irrespective of the result, the turnout was 69.7 per cent, against the recent EU Parliament election's mere 40.6 per cent. As often, what is true offline gets validated online. The level of participation on the TH!NK website suggests yet again that the European electorate, or at least the young generation, aspires to be more and more directly connected with public policy debates so long as they can own part of it, and that they are prepared to rely on technology to facilitate that connection. TH!NK demonstrates how social media is a powerful democratising force. With clear venues of their own making through which they can make their voices heard, citizens expect politicians to be listening. Unfortunately, it appears that both Brussels and national capital leaders are still struggling with that message. Instead of taking cues from and focusing on issues that really engage the public, the last election turned on local and national issues that failed to motivate. One could argue that Brussels' failure to better engage the public is leading directly to shrinking confidence in EU institutions at a time when their real world impact is at its zenith. A bolder, social media oriented public engagement could well help regain some trust and realignment.



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➔ **Talk alone is not enough**

TH!NK has taken on a huge challenge with a diverse audience, and met this with good tactics such as: a wide range of contributors to match the audience; competitions to galvanise people; social media to encourage discussion; and not mediating unless absolutely necessary for openness. But ultimately, they failed, right? Engagement didn't improve: voting numbers hit an all-time low. Online measures such as HowSocial and Social-Mention show they've done extremely poorly. Their claim of a high hit count is an extremely misleading figure, the AVE of online metrics. I think this is because they tried to achieve success without setting good objectives. Let's look at the words. They said it was an 'experiment'. In my mind, this is a danger signal. Experiments enable people to sidestep objectives, and therefore measurement, and therefore whether or not they succeeded. And the objective here? Again, it's about words. The community is 'dynamic', and dictionary.com tells me that 'dynamic' means 'effective action'. Talking is not enough. TH!NK needs to get people voting. Barack Obama's team realised that online chatter was worth diddly-squat unless people went out and canvassed, then reported what they'd done online, with blogs, pictures and videos. They didn't just talk about it: they did it. Objectives, objectives, objectives. Don't leave your house without them. If TH!NK had focused on getting people to energise, to act, to vote, rather than just talking about it, then they may have done things differently.



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young people." This point of view is backed up by a recent study of EU politicians performed by Fleishman-Hillard. The agency questioned 110 MEPs representing 26 member states and came to the conclusion that only a minority of them have fully grasped the potential of using online technologies to help them engage meaningfully with their electorate. Nevertheless, Autio believes that social media platforms will be significant in the future of political communications. "I don't think it's the only way forward, but it's definitely a very effective way, especially with young people," she says. "Youth in all member states are interested in this medium, so it should be used much more than it currently is. It could definitely go hand in hand in encouraging people to vote – and not just in the Europeans elections. If the same type of technology was used in national elections I'm sure you would see results."

Ultimately, turnout at the 2009 elections was 43 per cent, a record low. It was not TH!NK's explicit goal to get more people to vote, though, and Autio believes the project was a success. "The experiment turned out far more successful than what we could have ever imagined in the beginning," she says. "When we started we had no idea how it would be received, but it went far beyond any expectations. TH!NK shows that it is possible to move people, even with a difficult subject like the European elections." A second TH!NK campaign is now in the pipeline in the run-up to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (COP15) in December. If that succeeds in getting a Europe-wide discussion started on the challenge of protecting the planet for future generations, this can only be a good thing. |

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